The Constable of St. Nicholas

Edwin Lester Arnold

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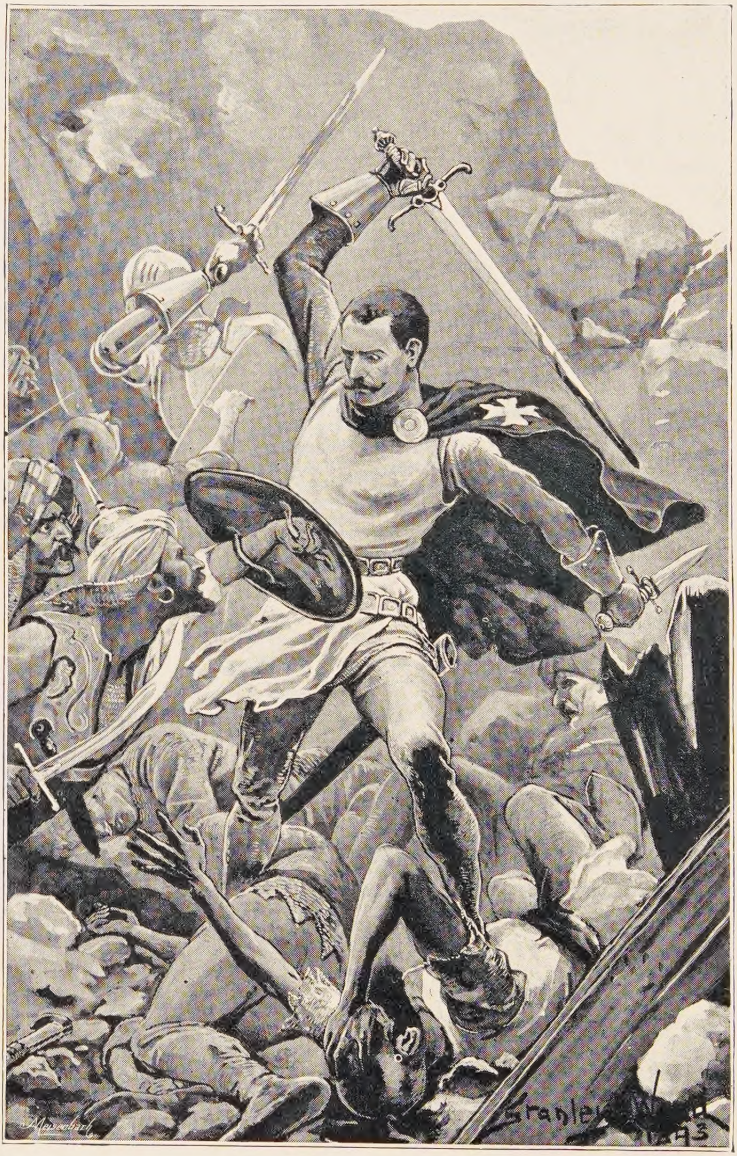

THOSE TWO CHAMPIONS FOR A FEW MINUTES HELD THE PLACE. [*Page* 225.

THE CONSTABLE OF ST. NICHOLAS

BY

EDWIN LESTER ARNOLD

AUTHOR OF

"THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF PHRA THE PHŒNICIAN," ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY STANLEY L. WOOD

London

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1894

THE CONSTABLE OF ST. NICHOLAS

PROLOGUE.

Just at that time when Edward IV. was waging war on the English border with the disordered forces of James III. of Scotland and threatening the French king in the South with the sinking fires of his imperious spirit; when in England men's ears were still ringing with the slogans of York and Lancaster, and Europe was torn by twenty forms of ambition and bigotry; when the ink was still wet upon Caxton's earliest type, and ladies' bonnets were tall as steeples,—about that time there happened, in the easternmost corner of the Mediterranean, amid all the dreadful pageantry of battle and siege, as tragic a story of love and jealousy as any within the records of those restless passions.

The beautiful island of Rhodes had then been in the possession of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem for a long period of peace. Ejected, a hundred and seventy years before, from the strongholds in Palestine which their valour had won at the point of the sword,

they had fallen back at that early point of their history from Nicea and Antioch and Tarsus and Edessa, to find, at the foot of the lovely Grecian archipelago, and still within sight of the coveted land, an island fortress rising ivory-white out of the blue Ægean, and this, in the years that followed, their skill fortified and their generosity embellished to such a degree that to-day engineer and excavator stand delighted and amazed even to look upon those broken ramparts and ruined streets of fallen palaces which once constituted the citadel of the most renowned brotherhood of princely adventurers ever drawn together by a common bond in the history of the world.

Just when Rhodes was at the zenith of its splendour and its muster-roll included scions of every noble house in Christendom, and the image and superscription of a dozen different kings was upon the stream of broad silver pieces that flowed from numberless manors into its coffers, it was called upon to withstand the severest assault that even its eventful records bear witness to. Sultan Mahomet II. had, a few months before, succeeded to the throne of Bajazet, and those who live on the whispers of princes had heard that swarthy potentate swear to himself a grim oath as he put foot upon the dais and conjured up in his mind new realms of conquest—"Constantinople first, and then Rhodes!" Constantinople had fallen, the last of the royal Paleologi

was no more, the bazaars of the beautiful city on the Bosphorus had run ankle-deep with Christian blood, and white-faced Christian girls had been as cheap for many weeks in the slave-stalls of Scutari as chickens on the eve of Ramadan; and now the great hosts of Sultan Mahomet were gathered on the yellow plains of Ismid, ready and eager for the assault of that other and easternmost outwork of the rival religion, over which the white-cross pennons of St. John floated, a perpetual affront and menace to the forces of the Crescent.

At this time D'Aubusson, the ablest grand master who had ever thrown the priestly robe of his order over a suit of princely mail, held supreme sway in the island. He had long watched the Moslem hosts gathering, and, perceiving that no common struggle was at hand, had filled his granaries with corn, and cleaned out his wells, stocking his arsenals with arms and ammunitions, and repaired the wide sweep of ramparts enclosing the town in a strong crescent of broad foss and high wall. He had drawn in his flotilla of lateen barks into the inner of the two harbours upon the sea front of the town, and strengthened the strong tower of St. Nicholas on the mole near where the long-before fallen Colossus once stood, apportioning each place upon the walls to the different *langues* of Auvergne, Provence, Aragon, Italy and Castile, England and France; until, as that stalwart servant of the Cross looked over the blue

Ægean and the green hills far to the northward that May evening in 1480 which ushered in that strange tragedy this story records, he must have felt that, come what would, the Order was prepared, and he at least had done his duty.

And while her priestly autocrat toiled for her safety, Rhodes herself, gay, bright, and thoughtless, seemed to have scarcely an idea of her peril. Her streets each day were thronged with glittering cavalcades of soldiers in steel and silk; her quays were piled deck-high with freights from every corner of the mid-land sea; Florentine and Latin, brown Bisque, and laughing Iberian traders thronged her markets, the coral fishers of Oristano piled their pink ware on the white portico steps of the Knights; sleek Greeks from Larissa, in embroidered caftans and wide petticoats, strolled through the squares with packs of glittering toys upon their backs. There, straying from the motley crowd, you would see a seedy, out-at-elbow, ever-thirsty minstrel, in sad sorrel tights, with mandoline strapped on his back, drinking from a smiling Dorian's wine-sack; and yonder, again, a black rogue, smelling of blood and piracy, from the lonely bays of Pantellaria, was chaffering a Frankish lady's bracelets and a cavalier's gold spurs with a green Christian squire, who took down as kindly as though it were his mother's milk that cut-throat's tale of how he came by them. Everywhere the busy hum of life resounded in the streets; the long strings

of slaves with mattocks and baskets on their shoulders came and went to the ramparts; the steep ways from the harbour were blocked with creaking bullock-waggons dragging warlike stores from ship to citadel: but Rhodes cared nothing for all that! Half the chivalry of Europe was within her walls. Money was as plentiful, thanks to that glittering throng that held her, as olives round Oppido. Every day saw new ship-loads of gay Christian warriors arrive from over seas. The long white Street of the Knights, bright with the banners and bannerets of those who lodged within its marble porticoes, echoed to the laughter and song of a dozen different lands as that fair fortress city stood waiting the shock of the Moslem hosts.

The sober black garb of the Order of St. John, with the white cross borne by each knight upon his shoulder, was merging into the splendid habiliments and princely ostentation of those who had come to its succour. Its canons, once monastic, had been relaxed in long spells of peace. The plain three meals a day, of rye bread, and fish, and water, which had served the brotherhood when the strong cities of Judæa and Samaria tumbled to the dust even at the shaking out of their pennons, had long since grown into luxurious banquets, each knightly bailiff striving to make his auberge table the most lavish and brilliant in the camp. The stern sumptuary simplicity of an earlier time had given way to sumptuous extravagance: the

dark cloak of St. John had for many years only half veiled the richest armour that Spanish smiths could forge or Persian jewellers enrich. "Brotherhood, poverty, and chastity," those ancient vows, had long sat lightly on the necks of these good soldiers of the Cross; and now, as triple incentive to luxury and display, were all these jolly comrades new come with dancing colours, and gay trapping, and troops of noisy yeomen,—bringing with them a whiff of outer air to leaven the stagnant atmosphere which, God wot, they said, still hung somewhat heavily about the sweet Seer's cloister walls; and troops of minstrels, and wallets itching to unload their store of golden coins, and all the newest love-songs of Provence and fair Castile, and all the quaintest fashions of gay Paris and Milano! No priestly simplicity was proof against the infection of those gallant swordsmen, and gay cavalcades went out to hawk, each morning, amongst the olive-covered hills beyond the city's ramparts, and the silver trappings of the chargers rang all day in the narrow streets, and the broad bay was bright as a bed of flowers as every glittering barge with gonfalons and streamers trailing in the pale blue harbour water disembarked its lordly Christian conscripts. And at night the fishers of Aloupo said the bronzed sky for many a league gleamed with the thousand twinkling lights of Rhodes—a thousand watch-fires glittered in the dusk upon her roof-tops; and jest and laugh and song echoed until the morn-

ing star was high, amid grey cloisters used only to vesper bell and midnight orisons.

Amongst all that noisy throng, the most reckless in the pursuit of pleasure, the most spendthrift amongst a galaxy of nobles who felt the Moslem steel already waving at their throats, and well understood that humanity goes forth from the world as naked and disendowed of gear as it came to it, was the young knight Oswald de Montaigne. Supple and tall in person, a great strength combined with an unusual grace of limb and movement, his figure was one no less noticeable in a peaceful throng than in the thickest dust of a hard-fought *mêlée*. His strong black hair, clipped as short as the stern necessities of his helmet demanded, framed a handsome and masterful face; while his soldierly carriage did all that still remained to be done to make him in outward show the very perfection of an adventurous soldier of the age, ambitious, headstrong, and gallant. That he had all the highest qualities of his profession half Europe knew. Since Roland first flaunted in steel and gold before the eyes of admiring Christendom, there had been scarcely another captain of like age and station of whose desperate valour in war or many accomplishments in peace more tales were told.

His father, old Louis de Montaigne, was a type of the jolly, reckless, fighting baron, who, having pawned his inheritance for a band of hard-hitting hard-drinking mercenaries and the wherewithal to

keep them in leathern jerkins and so much sack each man as was necessary to secure their grateful fidelity, had wandered through Europe for forty years, singing, drinking, and fighting with those gallant swashbucklers cantering at his sorrel stallion's tail.

Wherever knocks were hardest and blood ran reddest there might old Louis de Montaigne have been seen waving his tattered pennon in the dusty air and urging on those russet-clad spears of his, with a large appetite for contest and a true love for the jolly clatter of good steel on stout helms which gave small heed to any niceties of cause or quarrel. There was scarcely a burly warden at any castle from Oldenburgh by the shallow northern sea to where at strong Hermanstadt the dim Wallachian pines begin who did not know that keen old fighter's grizzled face; and there was no court in Europe where he was not sure of civility, with meat and wine and shelter for him and his, and fighting on the morrow if it could by any means be compassed. For forty years he drank, and pillaged, and threw his gallant rusty blade into such side of the scales of quarrel as he thought would pay the best; and at the end of that time, still redoubtable and unsatiated with the strong wine of adventure, dear to him as the breath he breathed, the old soldier found himself penniless, with his fair band shrunk by sword and wassail to a scanty handful. Thereat, indomitable, he cast about to see how best his fortunes might be mended;

and luck sent in his way an English woman of fair face and, what was not less important to the veteran, noble revenues. What special points in the grim soldier's character or person touched the soft heart of the lady is not upon record, nor is it known whether that fair citadel was carried by sap or escalade, but in a very few months she was married to De Montaigne; and in a few other short weeks he had converted every available penny that could be raised upon the lady's possessions into habiliments and horses for a new band of free-lances: and with this troop behind, and his hardy wife on a good Flemish steed at his side, he was in mail again, and off into the wilds of Hungary, to espouse the first fantastic feud that gave good chance of pay, pillage, and hard fighting.

Oswald de Montaigne, the only child of this strange pair, if he was not born in the saddle, drew in the hot incense of fight with his earliest sigh. From tent to tent, and camp to camp, he passed while yet in first swaddling clothes, the solace of his mother's arms scarce softening to him the roughness of the wild free life they led. And when he grew a little bigger it was still the same. Now his nursery would be the plundered palace of a king, his baby bed on tumbled heaps of silk and minever, his play-things the glittering treasures of ancient princedoms which soldier playmates shot out before him, then the next night his cradle was a whin bush on a lonely

hill, with half a soldier's rain-soaked cloak for wrapping, and the dim smouldering camp fires for taper! When the boy could lisp the first words he said were "Pikes and halberds." His young unlettered eyes learnt alphabets from charts and plans of towns his father's mercenaries had sacked and burned. The very food he took was tinged with the smell of blood and powder. Battle-fields were playgrounds to him; and sometimes he would sit in front of his mother, amongst the baggage wagons under the fringe of the green Sclavonian pines, and laugh and shriek with pleasure, and clap his small red hands in glee, to see the fierce bright pageantry of fight go humming down the valley far below—shouting, as though he knew it all already, when the green flags and the red and the white perked and tossed and sank and rose again in the furious stream of battle, and the good white spears, clothing the hillsides with a glistening harvest as thick as rye, bent and rustled, and came rolling down in long, smooth waves, like the same rye when the strong wind blows upon it in September! It was a rude training, but such as it was it was all old De Montaigne's heir could get.

When Oswald was eighteen, and already of unusual strength and high accomplishment in the exercises of war and courts, both his father and mother died. Almost all his mother's fortune had by this time slipped through the open fingers of her warlike lord. Yet there was something still left; and that the

young De Montaigne might know how much or how little this came to, and have at least a chance of that gentler education for which his rough life in the field had given him no leisure, his mother's only brother, Sir John Walsingham, called him to England.

Oswald went, and found in his uncle a tough old soldier of the civil wars, who had hung his honourable sword up for ever over the huge fireplace in his ancestral hall, and dedicated the rest of his life to the care of a fair young daughter, motherless like Oswald himself, and to the wide sweep of fertile territory which lay round his castle and paid him tribute. These two, in their generous, open way, took Oswald to their hearts. His laughing soldier spirit charmed them, his strength and prowess in every game that was set afoot made the stout old baron blush with pleasure in such a kinsman, and it set fair Margaret's maiden heart beating as it had never beat before. Then, at night, by the great fire, Oswald would tell such wondrous tales of brave deeds and hard fights, that old Sir John swore over his burnt sack that they were as good as anything he had ever done himself; and Margaret's fair eyes spoke to Oswald's sweet if dangerous commendation.

Thus it came about that, in a month or two, De Montaigne had won his cousin's heart; in boyish fashion they had plighted a troth under the cedar trees in the chase which one of them was to forget in a few short weeks; and Oswald might have

descended into the pleasant ways of peace for good and all, but that just then a murmur came of new fighting over in Europe, and, on a sudden, the old adventurous hunger was hot within him, his blood set running in a new direction, he grew as restless as a chained passage hawk in spring time, the broad comfort of that stately English home was heavier to him than prison bars and bonds—not even the brand-new virgin love of that sweet brown-haired girl could keep Oswald de Montaigne when his father's spirit moved within him and he heard the thunder of charging squadrons and smelt the smoke of battle in the air. He mortgaged in haste to his secretly sympathizing uncle all that was left of his mother's share in a great inheritance, and, pressing the white and tearful Margaret once again in his arms, Oswald was away, back into the strife and the glitter and the hardship, with the recollection of the pleasant English life behind him growing daily fainter and more faint in his mind.

When that plunge was taken Oswald was a raw youth, of big frame, without name or reputation,—when he emerged, ten years afterwards, he emerged with the accolade of knighthood on his shoulders, a reputation for courage and prowess second to none of his years; and if, along with the rapidly swelling chorus of his fame, there came some dark whispers from the obscurity of those intermediate years—some half-heard rumours that young Oswald de Montaigne

had proved as reckless and extravagant in intervals of peace as he had shown more than once cruel and unscrupulous in war—the rumours were but half articulate, and made but small way against the strong tide of his rising fame.

Adventures are to the adventurous. Everything Oswald attempted prospered. One brilliant deed followed another in rapid succession; campaign succeeded campaign, until presently there came a lull upon European politics, and it seemed that the young Count's sword was to be sheathed for an indefinite time just when it was beginning to reap the rich harvest of renown its owner coveted so dearly.

Even then it did not occur to him to return to England and his kinsmen. He still cherished a vague affection for his beautiful cousin—he had sent her costly furs and gems now and again,—and once or twice, when his resources had been at the lowest, Oswald de Montaigne had wondered whether it were not better to throw down his sword and share a dull, happy, eventless English state with that sweet heiress who in his wildest mood he never doubted would be his whensoever it might please him to ask. But this fancy never lasted more than an hour or two, and when that lull fell upon the princedoms of Europe he turned his eyes to where trouble was brewing most quickly, and the knights of the famous Order of St. John of Jerusalem were preparing to make a desperate stand at the easternmost bulwark of

Christendom against the Moslem. He saw that in the bonds of an Order which included in its chivalry members of all the noblest families in Europe, and was itself by gift and charter of princely rank, honour was to be gained and adventure had by one such as himself. Nor was the astute Peter D'Aubusson, the popular grand master of the Order, at all loth to secure the services, at a critical period of their history, of a captain whose strong arm was already a terror in the front of battle, and whose ready wit had saved many a desperate enterprise from ruin. In brief, Oswald joined the Order, not yet as a brother bound by its strict vows—these would come in time,—but as a stout ally and comrade of the great guild of priestly soldiers. And thus he had waited.

For one reason or another the crisis that overhung Rhodes delayed its coming month by month, and during this time of idleness, with all the luxurious resources of that fair fortress city at command, those black rumours that had gathered round the young soldier's name came to a focus. There was not a canon of the Order he had not flouted in secret, the preceptors whispered; the once modest poverty of the brotherhood, they said, had been hastened on its downward road to sumptuous wickedness since Oswald cast in his lot with theirs; the chalices of those Christian knights which once were filled with water twice a day from the valley springs now flowed over with strange strong draughts; the frightened villagers

of Marmaras upon the mainland had begun to vow Christian soldiers were growing worse neighbours than Pantellarian pirates; strange echoes of riot and revelry unheard before sounded in the city's quiet streets, strange streams of barbarous money flowed into the markets of the town, strange silks and soft stuffs that did not suit with the black livery of the brotherhood passed into that citadel of holy poverty, strange sandal-bells tinkled on those austere pavements, strange gleams of the white robes the light Cimmerian women wear glinted at times between the moonlit pillars,—all this, and much more, was whispered in the town. And so things stood on the eve of that strange story of love, and hate, and jealousy which now begins.

CHAPTER I.

Led on by a crafty Greek of low origin, Isaac Saluzzio, the young Count de Montaigne had at last pledged his name and credit so deeply that the only escape seemed to be temporary retirement and the prompt acceptance of that golden hand which he believed his cousin still held out to him. He was beset on every side by impatient creditors and sinister looks, when, at the very crisis of his fate, a thrill of expectation ran through Rhodes to know that the Moslem was coming—and coming upon her this time in earnest,—with an army which, the frightened watchers said, covered the Syrian hills like locusts in corn time, and a white winged fleet that rode as numerous along the edge of the sea as white waves in a December storm.

Oswald at this moment held the post of Constable of the tower of St. Nicholas, at the entrance of the harbour of Rhodes. Up in the extreme summit of that fortress-keep he had furnished himself a sleeping-apartment, and, luxurious as he was no less than inflexible in danger and hardship, he had softened

the grim plainness of that great grey vaulted chamber with tapestries and silks and hangings, and put a mighty bed, deep heaped with downy coverlets such as an emperor might have envied, upon one side; and piled silk cushions by the window, and Damascus carpets on the turret balcony outside wherefrom you could see all over Rhodes and half the neighbouring islands. To this room, grim and grey outside, and inside soft and quaint and dainty, he came, dusty and tired with a long day's work on the eve of the great siege, and, tossing off his heavy armour, threw himself wearily upon the couch by the embrasure.

But the rest he asked was the last thing the Fates had in store for that strong young soldier. Before he had had time to even glance over the wonderful panorama of sea and city spread beneath, a footstep sounded upon the stairs, and, in obedience to his permission, a serving brother of the Order entered, who, making his respectful obeisance on the threshold, came forward, tendering as he did so a folded letter to the knight.

"What! more writing, Morrogh,—more petitions, more drafts?" he cried fretfully, as his eye fell upon it. "I tell you, Morrogh, I am sick of the very sight of all such things, and hate their musty smell. Put it on the table, and, good fellow, instead, bring me up a jug of that Cyprus wine. I would not open another scroll to-day though it were to save the necks and money-bags of all the traders from

here to Cadiz." And contemptuously turning his back upon the missive and the bearer, Oswald threw himself back upon the cushions once more, and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"But, sir," said the brother, hesitatingly, "this message is marked urgent."

"And I tell you, Morrogh, that nothing is urgent but that drink I crave for."

"It was sent ashore by a ship's captain."

"That doubly damns it, then; for when did sailor ever pen anything that a Christian landsman could read or understand?"

"I was to give the letter into your own hands and none other, and with it to say the captain brings a rich freight of Eastern stuffs, by sample sent whereof he hopes to gain and does beseech your valour's countenance and indulgence in the matter of harbour dues——"

"To deepest Hades with him and them!"

"And by way of passengers, I was to add, that the captain brings to Rhodes an English lady and a knight who are flying from the mainland, where, but a few days back, the Turks have slain the others of their company in that pilgrimage to the Holy City which they were making. 'Tis said, Count de Montaigne, by the sailor who landed with this letter, which itself coming from the lady, that she is of kin to you." And the duteous Morrogh, shooting this last shaft with bent head and humble eyes,

waited with the stealthy curiosity of a servant who scents a mystery in his master's affairs to see how Oswald took it.

If he hoped the shaft would tell he could scarcely have been disappointed. De Montaigne had heard some time before that Margaret Walsingham and her father had set out for the Holy City, on one of those fantastic pilgrimages which it was the fashion with gentle and simple alike to make. In the hurry and glitter of his life even the very fact had slipped from his memory, and here was a woman come to his door, a fugitive from the shrine to which, it now flashed upon him, Margaret had set out but a little time before—and claiming kinship! He had no other kin. Was it possible that, at the very instant when life turned upon his cousin's will, and nothing could save him from the ruin he had courted but that rescue which she alone could make, that the kind Fates had sent her straight into his arms? A right royal chance indeed—a splendid freak of fortune, that would mend in an hour the disaster that had been closing on him for months! And Oswald, forgetting fatigue and weariness, forgetting even the presence of the watchful servitor, was on his feet in a minute, and, striding across the room, eager, exultant, and flushed with expectant pleasure, stretched out his hand for the letter. "Here, give it to me!" cried the soldier, and took the packet with quick and nervous fingers, in his hurry waiting not

to untie the silk threads that bound it, but—an evil omen—ran his Milan dagger point across them, then, as they fell off, checked himself, and, ashamed that strange eyes should witness his changing colour, pointed the servitor to the door. That humble disciple of St. John bowed low, and without a word left the room.

Then the knight was free to give rein to those headstrong emotions which swayed him. He examined the writing on the cover of that precious missive, and kissed it twenty times, laughing lightly to himself, "Oh, her very and certain hand! I know it well—every point and line speaks of the admirable scribe who penned it. How I hated the lean old scholar who first taught my sweet cousin to spoil white parchment with these lines and letters! yet now I bless him for the art he gave, since his pupil puts it to such purpose. What does she say?" And eagerly unfolding the letter, he read it.

"At Sea off Rhodes.

"Dear Friend and Cousin,

"Often of late have I wished to write to you, and as often the stress of ceaseless travel and lack of trusty messengers, no less than some hesitation born of my news, has made the good intention fruitless. God wot the best part of what there is to tell is so sad that my tears fall thick upon the paper as I write, and the labour is near set by again once

more unfinished! My father, that dear and valiant soldier whose brave, rough heart was ever like a tender girl's to me, who tempered his high spirit to tune with my earliest fancies, and out of his great love had no recreation but my pleasure and no delight but in my happiness—oh, Oswald, that dear loved soldier is no more!

"You have heard how it was that I came to be in Palestine? I had longed to see the Sepulchre and the City, and importuned my father to take me with him this last time he set out for Syria, until at last he consented. It was, I think, against his better judgment and because he irked to leave me, kinsmanless, to strangers amongst those halls and corridors of ours—which, alas! are now no longer ours, but mine—that he took me. Be it as it may, all went well, we reached the holy shore, and saw the Shrine, and then we turned back to the coast and dear and distant England.

"And then—would that these tears could wipe the sentence out in fact as nearly as they do in deed—and then, on the last day's journey, we lit upon a band of those Turks who are swarming to arms along the coast. A man of gentler mood than my father might, mayhap, have brought us through without a show of weapons, but his hot spirit could never brook constraint; it angered him to see those ruffians tumbling our baggage things about, and, when their captain lifted my litter curtain, he felled him to the

ground with one mighty buffet of that great fist many know of. At once all was wild confusion which lasted till my father and an English knight, Sir Andrew Hepburn, with his followers, put the villains to the rout.

"As they fled one ragged, horrid man amongst them turned, and from a rock let fly a mean, trivial javelin. Oh, Oswald, I saw it fly! I saw it strike, from out my litter. I saw that brave old soldier reel in his saddle, and clap one gallant hand upon his bosom, and clutch with the other on the empty air! I saw the bright red blood run out from between his fingers in the sunshine; I saw the cruel yellow dust that rose as that dear body fell from saddle heavily to earth—and I was on foot in a breathing space, screaming and flying to him through all the litter and turmoil of the *mêlée*. And on this shoulder, dear cousin and playmate—while brave Andrew Hepburn, with visor up, held his hand and wept strong tears of gentle comradeship—my sweet father died a scanty week ago.

"You who knew him so well, you who owe him so much, will mourn him with a grief which is only next in degree to mine; and would that I could soften that grief to you, for I know beforehand your generous sympathy and your good heart, and how you will strive by reasoning to stay these tears that gush from my eyes even to tell to pen and paper this week-old sorrow. But I must cry, Oswald,

—I shall cry fiercely when I see you, and do not hinder me!

"And now, dear cousin, the white towers of your Rhodes are shining out of the blue sea ahead of us, the green water goes prattling swiftly by the vessel's side near to my ear, in an hour or two we shall be under those fair white battlements that shine upon the shore ahead, and there is still that to say which comes but poorly after what has gone before. Yet it must be said, and I school myself to think it will seem a little matter to you, one all too small to justify the difficulty I have in telling it. My father liked and trusted you, and I who loved him perforce did as he did and thought as he thought. It was thus you and I became those friends which I trust in heaven we may ever continue. I knew my father's wishes, how much he thought our lands would prosper in your steward care, and even, as you know, kind comrade, I once half thought—too young to measure the compact that I put my hand to—that some day by our agreement and my heriting you would have nearer and better cause to ward and husband those acres for me. But I was a child then, as surely as now I am woman. And you, too,—you have gone out and seen men, and things, and cities,—you have taken or will shortly take those vows which are the gateway of knightly ambition but shut you for ever from such thoughts of love and possessions as lesser men cling to. Nothing can it matter to you, vowed to

a holy poverty, that that crooked javelin, cut from an unkind tree, gave me at one fell stroke all the lands of Tasborough and Headington; or that by bitter gift in deed it did endow me with broad Gillingham and Kilverstone, and made me woeful lady paramount of Raithby Hall and great Hemsworth House!

"For all this I know you nothing care, while for me, myself, you are sworn by your free choice to holy constancy, and ne'er to look upon a woman with any but distant brother love; therefore, nothing forgetting of your friendship and still holding you in the high esteem which indeed I do, I yet have thought—how could I else?—that I was free and released from those suppositions which nothing but my youth ever acknowledged, and which your long silence and new vows had seemed to break for good and all.

"There came at times to see my father while we were in England that gentleman I have mentioned, Sir Andrew Hepburn. At Acre he joined our pilgrimage; it was he who avenged my father's death, and, proving dutiful and tender as I knew he was courageous, dried my tears, and did all that for me which my grief and unprotectedness called for. In brief, good friend, he was so courteous that when he presently proffered me his love and esteem as some slight set against all that I had lost, I, no less from great liking for him than from great loneliness,

accepted what he offered, and we are to be married as shortly as may be. This, dear cousin, is why I come to you, my only kinsman, for countenance and counsel.

"You will like him, I know you will. He is generous and open, and carries a manner with him which is better than the best introduction ever penned; above all, he is my dear friend, and that he should become yours also is, for the minute, the best wish of her who here subscribes herself,

"Your constant friend and once-time playmate,

"MARGARET WALSINGHAM."

As the Count finished this fateful note a fierce gust of disappointment and anger swept over his face. At the light touch of those gentle words, penned by a womanly hand, all the edifice of his selfish hopes had gone to ruin,—to hopeless, cruel, bitter chaos,—chaos at a touch of that white English girl whose love he had schooled himself to regard as no more than a stepping-stone in the bold scheme that should once again put a new spell of power and luxury and pleasure within his grasp; and he held the paper before him for a moment while his face paled with the force of the passion in his heart, and then crushed that letter that had been written with so much care and niceness in his strong hand—crushed it between those iron fingers that Moslem throats went sore even to think of—crushed and tore it into

a hundred fragments at last, and, casting the white litter behind him, buried his dark face for a minute in his hands.

When Oswald looked up the seed of a bitter hatred of the English girl had germinated in his heart. Never one to consider much the motives or hopes of others when they ran counter to his own, this blow was all the harder to bear since it came from her who, in his mind, he had thought of an hour ago as still but a country wench, "a pretty pink doll with more than half a shire for dower." And now, starting up from the seat on which he had thrown himself, he fiercely muttered, "Was this plaything, this baby queen of broad acres and fat money-bags, this toy he used to pet and laugh at, this sapling child-woman whose unripe lips he had kissed when last they parted, this untutored heiress of broad lands and stately halls, this jade, this jilt, this pretty baggage with a princely fortune in her lap, to slight and flout him in his need? Gillingham and Kilverstone, Hemsworth Park and wide Raithby leas—gods! were they all to go in such light gift as this to some young strutting cockerel, to some lank callow gallant, while Oswald de Montaigne, dismissed by a wave of lady's hand, went down for ever amongst the fangs of that howling band of usurers who pressed hot upon him?—a dainty story with a nice moral to it! He laughed and ground his teeth, and stamped upon the littered fragments, and smiled and frowned

in turn as alternate thoughts of new difficulties and futile methods of escaping from them rose in his eager mind.

But the single conclusion to which he always came was that, placed as he was, the hand of his fair cousin was absolutely essential to him; it was the one saving-point in the general disaster which his reckless extravagance had brought about. The doors of that Order by which lay his only certain path to the fame and influence he coveted would shortly be closed against him; and, liberal as they were in admitting, he knew that there was one man at least in Europe who would never enter them again if but his degradation came to be noised abroad, and that man was Oswald de Montaigne, the contaminated of the infidel, the betrayer of trusts, the disgracer of the fair fame of the brotherhood and desecrator of its vows! The young Count laughed, as he strode angrily up and down the chamber, to picture to himself the grim pantomime of his expulsion from cause and comradeship with that noble fraternity. He pictured the great consistory met to expunge a name from its rolls which once, it was whispered, might top them with a lustre that had never shone even in that place before. "Curse them! curse them!" fiercely cried the soldier, in his impotent rage shaking his clenched fist against the shadowy conclave,—"curse them for a crew of shallow pedantic monks! I can see in foreboding fancy our grey hall ranked from end to

end with fools, six deep on either side, their great archfool seated at the top, with face as long and yellow as any roll of parchment on the table by him. Then to that sombre stillness will speak our reverend quæstor, the curtains draw, and up the hall stalks Oswald the arraigned; and all those virtuous brothers drop their chins, and droop their eyes, and thank God they be not wicked. Liars! the selfsame wine that has undone me is still wet upon their lips; those meek eyes of theirs are more conversant with the bottom hells of wickedness than e'er were mine! Traitors, false comrades,—will they dare to flout and turn from me because I touched Moslem gold to do that which the best amongst them dared not; because I plucked a white dove for mine own use out of the black bosom of a swart ally, and led them, hustling and shouting, down that broad path of pleasure which once the bravest of them durst do no more than sigh for?" Then dropping his voice in moody fit, he paced about and went on, "Oh they will flout, and turn upon me without a doubt, remembering a hundred things never meant to be remembered, which but for this ill turn of chance would else have been quite forgotten. They will acclaim my downfall when it is put upon their suffrage with that unity which, Heaven knows, they hold mark of virtuous comradeship, and pile upon the charges set against me (all out of their brother-love) such evidence as might damn the whitest soul

that was ever borne away to blessedness. So it ends," cried Oswald, shaking his fist out towards where the white porticoes of the town shone over the blue harbour-water,—"so it ends; and then, behold the archfool on foot again to curse and ban, and Oswald de Montaigne is stripped of belt and vestment, cap and buckler, and led down that sad shamefaced avenue of perjured comrades and forsworn friends; a low horse-boy purveyed for the especial duty, does kick his knightly cognizance down the clattering steps; the gates ring to, and what was once brave Oswald de Montaigne, gallant Oswald de Montaigne, strong and ambitious Oswald de Montaigne, stands nameless in the eyes of Christendom, an outcast amongst brother wastrels in the gutter!"

It was not a pleasant picture, and yet it was on the eve of coming true. No Order of Chivalry would welcome him whom the Holy Order of the Hospital had put by; none of the avenues to fame and repute lay free to one banned and banished by the Brotherhood of Zion. But with the English maid pliant to his wishes he might laugh to scorn the worst fulminations of the tribunal gathering to judge him Although not even the great possessions which would then be his could quite heal the wounds his folly had made, yet rich again, and still possessed of a splendid and unblemished repute for courage and success in all the arts of war, Oswald thought that he could guess a score of lesser courts where, condoned by time, and all

harsh judgments sapped by the cunning application of that sweet auriferous stream which should run from the English lady's hands, Oswald might be himself again.

But all this without the hand of Margaret Walsingham was but idle speculation, and, after staring in gloomy abstraction at the white litter of her fatal missive on the floor, he turned on his heels towards the balcony, stepping out upon the narrow parapet that overhung the crowded bay and the dancing blue Ægean waves below, with, on the one hand, the fair wide crescent city, its strong walls and towers veined with gay streams of Eastern life that throbbed and flowed in the narrow ways, and, on the other, the great sweep of the midland sea, glittering under the low shine of the summer sun. But the knight turned angrily from where the white-cross flag of his Order was flapping idly on the tall dome of the Master's palace; he gave no heed to the faint black line of swarming slaves who clustered and thronged upon the growing ramparts far away towards the inland hills like a dusky fringe of human ants; he took no note of the faint thunder of hoofs, and the dust and the shouting which came up on the wind from where the tall Count de Monteuil was wheeling and turning and sending on mimic charges his squadrons of Christian cavalry; he did not hear the fisherboy, sitting on the rocks a hundred feet below, idly whistling the harbour mullet to his hook; but

he put a foot upon the stone bench that ran along under the parapet and an elbow upon his knee, and stared hard out to where, just beyond the harbour mouth, beating slowly about and waiting for a better slant of wind or another foot perhaps of the slack southern tide, were the pale sails of a white-winged trading felucca!

He did not need to be told who was on board that lateen ship. Too well he knew it; and crowding memories of a stately English home, where he had been hand in hand and heart in heart with a sweet white English girl, ran counter to the bitter flow of the baffled hopes that fed the fires of his hot and unruly nature as he watched the course of the white speck across the wide plain of the sea with alternate fits of wrath and pleasure. He stood and stared and frowned, while a remnant of the old love struggled in his heart with a bitter passion of chagrin and hate.

"So here comes," he thought, "the friendless lady with the splendid dower who held a fortune in the pit of her soft palm, and meant to fail him at his closest need, meant to put him by at the very turning-point of his fortunes for some thick-headed English clown! Here came the fair lady who had toppled at a breath those lordly schemes of great ambition Oswald had built upon her fair good will!" He laughed in bitter mood to think what ruin those few light lines of lady penmanship had made in the plans which he had hoped might shake princedoms

and encompass potentates; he laughed and scowled and bit his lip, and stared hard out at that white canvas slowly creeping in, while the hot low sun shone full upon the changing colour of his face.

"Ay, here comes cousin Margaret," he laughed, extending his arms in mocking welcome; "here comes pretty, stately cousin Margaret with the right valiant and gentle clown, young Andrew Hepburn, at her heels. And the poor soldier, Oswald de Montaigne, must off his cap, as does beseem him to his betters, and, if all goes well and nothing hinders, then presently the nice honour shall devolve upon him of dropping into the blue sea all those giddy dreams of golden state, and wide rule, and a hundred petty courts hanging on the smile of a soldier king,—all must be dropped to play lackey at this gilded wanton's marriage feast, and to place in a shallow yokel's hand the hand that holds Hemsworth and Kilverstone, Tasborough and Gillingham, and all those broad English acres mean!" Then, in a minute, another idea came upon him. "Ay, I said, 'If all goes well and nothing hinders;' but mayhap something *may* hinder! Here comes the rich spoil unsought to the bold robber; here comes the dove as quick as wing can beat into the strong bosom of the kite. 'If all goes well!'—supposing all did *not* go well? 'If nothing hinders!'—supposing something hinders—supposing Oswald, by his right and for great needs, should hinder—what then? In a day

or two at most this pearl-white town will be set in a furious red cloud of war; strong men will go down, and all their presumptions with them, and no one ask how, or why, or when; yonder sea that plays so shyly, like a diffident lover, at the golden feet of the shore, will be torn into a thousand frothy hollows with shot and shell: amid the sounds of that furious onset who is to hear the timid protests of one silly damsel's plea: who would stop to note amid the thunder of falling towers, the hum of old Messih's iron tiercelets screaming down the wind, and the roar of Christendom breast to breast with hell, how Oswald pressed his soldier suit, or by what nice points of argument he did repossess him of that which once was his? It is a shrewd consideration, and cheers me strangely."

While he thus mused Oswald had been standing upon the stone parapet that overhung the harbour, and, lost in his own fancies, had taken no note of what transpired in the chamber behind him. He had not seen the curtains across the inner doorway part, and a man enter clad in the belted tunic and fur shoes of the middle class—a man of address sleek and insinuating, with a lean, wrinkled face, sharp beaked nose and straight hard mouth, one who carried with him an air of crafty diffidence, and looked, from his foot to the frayed red feather in his bourgeois cap, the rascal that he was.

This individual, Isaac Saluzzio, one of the most

unscrupulous and crafty of the sordid panderers who hung about Rhodes and filled their pouches by the debauchery and extravagance of the younger knights, emerged cap in hand from the black shadow of the curtain with an obsequious reverence, which changed, as he found the room tenantless, into an insolent swagger. He put his cap upon his head in jaunty fashion, sticking his thumbs into his belt, and staring round until, in a minute, his eyes lit upon the torn paper Oswald had thrown down, when, ever alert to arm himself with the evidence of human weakness, he cautiously took up one bit and then another, holding them at arm's length and scanning the fragments of the fair, disjected sentences with greedy malice shining in his face. He put his head this side and that, and thrust his tongue into his cheek, and ogled those dainty lines, and what he read he liked. He had not time to decipher it nicely; but there was something of love and money in it, that grey panderer thought, something that smelt like secrecy in those torn fragments, and no one knew better than the crafty Greek how salable most secrets were. Therefore he read a line or two, and smiled and smiled again, and stuffed the scraps into his pouch with all the other bits his long, thin fingers could gather round about him on the floor.

He had scarcely pouched them safely when Oswald moved a pace upon the balcony and, still keeping his back turned, shook his fist at the white approaching

sail, and let the sullen fancies that perplexed him show in his angry gestures as they passed one after the other across his mind. And that slim Greek behind, seeing the other thus engaged, and when he had assured himself he was unnoticed, swept the floor with that ragged red feather of his, and mocked the outward show of his master's passion, cap in hand, shaking his lean fist when the knight shook his, and slapping one hand into the other, folding his arms across his breast, and imitating, like a dark shadow, every angry start and impatient movement, the while he laughed long and silently in his bitter, joyless fashion; and then Oswald, turning suddenly with that last grim fancy new born in his mind, strode into the room and confronted him.

Every trace of mockery vanished from the Greek's face as the knight turned on his heel, and now with abject reverence he backed off from him in a series of low bows expressive of infinite respectfulness; and when these had brought Isaac to such a distance as he thought due, that versatile Greek stood slowly up and looked at the knight for the first time, with an expression in which humility and cunning strove for mastery. Oswald had followed the course of those laborious salutations with undisguised contempt, and when they ceased he said coldly, without a movement of his head—

"Salutations in turn, worthy Saluzzio. I was just wishing for some hell-counsel, and turning I find the

black gods had put you thus convenient at my elbow!"

"Good counsel, sir," said the Greek, with bent eyes, "may come from many places."

"That which you call good counsel, Isaac, is that which honest men would call the most infernal counsel that was ever hatched of a wicked brain since the gates of Eden shut upon our common mother. Good counsel, Saluzzio! when have you ever been to me but an egger on to every kind of wickedness? Who but you has made smooth and possible this gross path that I have trodden—decking my journey down to hell day by day with cunning tinsel? Who but you has led me on from hour to hour stifling with your damnable golden clamour the sighs of my conscience; veiling with your foul persuasiveness the uglinesses of the way I came; flitting by me for ever like the embodiment of my worst baseness; putting your wicked money-bags before me and letting me dip therefrom until this world and the next are mortgaged, and scarce even the sword I wear is my own; holding the drugged wine-cup to my lips, attending me, like the beastly lackey that you are, in drunken revels and every kind of lewdness. Saluzzio, friend and counsellor, if I had not need of you again to-day—and strong pressing need that overlaps by its greatness all those lesser needs of mine you have pandered to—but for this big necessity, Saluzzio, I could find it in my heart to crush you, here as we

stand, from all form and fashion of humanity, and toss your shapeless carcase—as they toss the carcase of a stoned cur—into that sea below us!"

"And I," said the Greek, rubbing his meekly folded hands, while his small eyes twinkled with scorn and malice,—"I am duly grateful to those necessities which inclined your valour to such leniency. I think," he added with a sneer, "it is not the first time the poor Jew's usefulness will have saved the poor Jew's neck!"

Oswald walked away to the balcony, and stood reflecting for a moment. Then he came back. "Isaac," he said, "it serves no purpose for us to quarrel. I have gone so far with you I must needs go still a little farther. You, who know so much, must needs know a little more; therefore, listen to me now, and, when I have done, then if by your cunning—whether it comes from heaven or hell I will not ask—if you can get me from the shadow of this oncoming cloud that blights my outlook and chills my courage; if you can twist these adverse circumstances that beset me into the shape I would, you will save more than you yet think of, nor find me grateless." And taking the arm of the wily Greek, in a mockery of that friendship which both knew existed only for the furtherance of their mutual needs, the soldier led him to and fro, while he poured into his ear, with all the earnest of his headstrong nature, the details of the difficulties besetting him.

Saluzzio knew much of what Oswald had to tell, yet even he did not know all. He knew of the young Count's nearness to the reversion of the splendid English domain, of his engagement to the only one who stood between it and him. It was this which had tempted the Greek to loan great sums of money, dear as the red drops of his own blood, to the reckless knight, taking mortgage and usury for every penny of it. He knew of his great fame and high place at the councils of St. John; he knew of Oswald's still untarnished reputation in the world; and, better still, he knew how that untarnished reputation might be toppled over at a breath: but he did not know what fierce wild work his splendid quarry had made these last few months, not only with his own bags of hoarded shekels, but with those of many others; he had not guessed how near the patience of the lenient hospitallers was run out with their haughty conscript. As he listened to all this, and comprehended for the first time how close the man whom he had permitted to squander his fortune, to further whose basest needs he had risked rack and rope, was to the loss of that name which was half his surety, the lean cheek of the Greek paled, and a strong shiver ran through him.

"But there is still the girl," he gasped to himself; "there is still the English girl. Even if black ruin gaped as wide at our feet as this mad fool says it does, she should still pull us through."

And then Oswald swept that ground itself from under his feet, telling him in a few stern sentences that Margaret Walsingham had, by a letter just received, claimed her freedom and made a new choice; that the lady and her lover were now landing in the town, "and when they left again it would be as man and wife"!

The smothered cry with which Isaac greeted the announcement was the genuinest expression of sentiment he had given way to for a long time. As the whole fabric of his great dream tottered before him, and seemed on the very brink of hopeless ruin, he started back from the knight, his sallow Levantine face became as yellow as the yellowest parchment of those which had lately gone to fill the gaps Oswald had made in his golden stores, he clenched his hands and stared at the soldier, while his small eyes fairly sparkled with the suppressed fury burning in his bosom. For a moment it seemed that silent storm of rage must wreck the thin, meagre body of the wrinkled Jew, so fierce it was, or fire his tongue with something like the fierce torrent of invective with which the higher villain of those two had acknowledged that chance had thrown the dice against him. But the training in restraint of the lesser schemer told at last, and with one fierce malediction he bent his head to the blow, and stood with sullen averted face a minute or two while his active mind reviewed a hundred ways to meet the difficulty;

and when he looked up again surprise and rage had gone, and in their place remained malice and the bitterest determination only. He took the hospitaller by the sleeve and walked him eagerly to the parapet, then back again, whispering quick and closely all the time, and so in a minute threw him off, and burst out with his harsh grating laugh—

"I tell you, Oswald," for diffident address had gone down along with many other things in those few moments; "I tell you they must *not* leave! Chapels, and marriages, and a licence from that fond old man in the palace yonder—it must never come to that! This braggart Hepburn that you speak of must die, and die quickly. Oh, I will see to it. 'Tis his profession. He thirsts, I warrant, for hard knocks and honour; and by the Splendid Heart he worships night and morning, by every talent of pure metal in that great wasteful crucifix which shines above St. Anthony's altar yonder, I swear he shall be put where he may get his fill of them, or Isaac's influence in this sweet city of spend-thrift Christian gentlemen will prove less than Isaac thinks!"

"And suppose," said Oswald, "that Andrew Hepburn took those knocks, and came, flushed with battle and brand-new honours, back to his lady's footstool. It were worse case then than ever with my chances and thy spent byzants. What would you do if that were so?"

"What would I do!" snarled the Greek; and then he hesitated and glanced quickly round and came up to the other, and laying a hand upon his wrist, whispered in his ear, "Is this a time to stick at trifles? Do you, Count Oswald de Montaigne, who, they say, have sent more souls spinning up to heaven in twenty years than any other knightly cut-throat of your age and standing, ask what's to do, when the air is heavy with the noise of steel and fire, when Christendom in valorous fraternity has sluiced its ramparts red with heathen blood, and one fat English boar stands between us and all the heaven we two are like to taste of!" And then still more eagerly he whispered, drawing at the same time from where it was hidden in the folds of his dress a keen Florentine dagger, and holding it up he glanced along the edge, while a cunning grin wrinkled his face, "If your cockerel, sir, should thrive on the strong meat of open battle, then there are other ways to ease him of this uneasy state which men call living, and wing him up to Paradise with all that expedition which we hope for. Young men like him, for instance, by one reason or another, will wander about o' nights, and Rhodes is full of dusky alleys and darksome corners whence a strong arm and a bit of steel such as this might settle an even longer reckoning than ours. Ah! ah!" he cackled, pointing down the keen edge of his knife; "a straight road to heaven this, sir, if a trifle narrow."

The proud spirit of Oswald de Montaigne, nourished amongst the ancient traditions of knightly comradeship and the strict laws of honour, shrunk even to listen to the Greek while he plotted such treachery. And yet—— Oswald turned away a space, and then gloomily asked—

"And supposing Hepburn had died—that is but one step nearer to my wishes—Margaret Walsingham may be less inclined than ever to look upon me favourably."

"And is your courage so watered down by a little adversity that nothing suggests itself whereby you could bend the lady to your needs if she proved contrary! Oswald de Montaigne was not always so cold as that. Oh, Abraham! is this the same man who set on young Poyns away in Styria, twenty to one, as he came down the altar steps, and, like a cheap footpad, bore his screaming bride away? Is this he who yester-night pillaged the harem of the friendly Hassan Agerood, and, masked as never knight was masked before, played wolf in that peaceful sheep-fold? is this he who, when the wife of John of Apallona——"

"Silence, you hell-dog!"

"Well, then, I only meant to hint that experienced Count Oswald de Montaigne—gentle, persuasive, difficult-to-be-thwarted Count Oswald de Montaigne, might, if he liked, find a way with this fair lady, who is to-day, he says, to put herself and all she has within his grasp."

The soldier frowned, and stood thinking for a minute; then he said—

"Such a way as that you mean, Isaac, might serve with some silly Cyprian maid; it might paint expediency in rosy hues to your shallow Greeks and Hunnish peasantry, but it would not suffice with my countrywomen. This girl who is coming, though she may look as soft as silk, would fight on occasion like twenty furies, and if eyes, and tongue, and nails, and all the devilry the gods have given to her sex, would not serve, she would cast herself, and all she has and holds, from yonder giddy ledge in the twinkling of an eye, sooner than listen for one moment to the suggestion of your black blandishments."

"Then let her go, Sir Knight! Let her go down to hell by the steepest road she knows of, if she will not share earthly felicity with us. I tell you, Nazarene, it must and shall be so. Have I poured out my hoards like water to minister to your vanity and pleasure; and will I now, with every argument of right and wrong upon my side, stand cringing by while you shilly-shally with the nice sensitiveness of your conscience and sue this white-faced fury like a country fool at the feet of his first mistress? Oswald de Montaigne, henceforth we go up or down together—nay, it nothing serves to scowl like that and toss your cloak about you,—we go henceforth up or down together; the one of these two who stand between us and our rise shall be gathered to the

great bosom of our father Abraham before the world be a week older, and the other you must see to. If she proves as stubborn as you think, then there might be many methods; lodged here, as she must be, in this turret, that leap you spoke of would be one good way to put her sweet white spirit beyond the reach of gross contamination. And it were a good way, because, when they presently picked her up from amongst the rocks below, not all the inquisitors from here to Thebes could say it was not a chance fit of melancholy had made her do it."

"Silence! silence, you dreadful counsellor! Some one may hear."

"No fear, I think, of that," laughed the Greek; "but to be on the safe side, and because your ears—like the ears of many others—are nicer than your eyes, I will suggest those alternatives in gesture which you dare not listen to in open speech!" And the villain forthwith began a course of dumb show.

First he went with many humble bows towards the open balcony, gesticulating and leading, as it might be, a shadowy lady by the hand; and when they were upon the very verge he swept a crooked, trembling finger round the painted picture spread before them, and fawned and smiled as though he did dilate upon that lovely landscape; and then a black leer, like an executioner's mask, dropped over his face; a push, a shove, and the shadowy lady was gone! And—it was so horribly real—while the

Greek waved his hands in mimic exultation above his head, Oswald stood with every nerve astretch to hear her strike upon the rocks below.

Then back came Saluzzio and slunk round the room, while the knight watched him with the speechless fascination of a charmed bird. He slunk round the wide turret chamber until he saw De Montaigne's drinking-horn upon the table, and took it up, and drank out the last of the good liquor with a silent laugh, glanced furtively over his shoulder as he drew a tiny packet from his bosom, and, opening it, slipped a white poison powder into the cup; then hastily covering it with wine, slipped away behind the curtains as though that shadowy lady was coming back again.

The strong hospitaller, under whose charger's hoofs the red swathes of war went down as corn goes down in August, stood trembling like a timid girl as he watched the lightest motion of the thick tapestry that screened the Greek; and when that villain showed and came slowly out again, Oswald glared at him with eyes wide open, and lips apart, and hands clenched that held his priestly cloak across his purple under-vestment. And now Isaac's stare was hard set upon a vacant bench across the room, and in his hand that long sharp blade of his was shining whitely. With dreadful purpose in every tight-strung limb and motion—like a panther slinking to its foe—he made the circuit of the hall, and was

within striking distance, and leapt as the unseen lady rose; and—oh, it was dreadful to see him go reeling and wrestling across the rushes in mimic struggle with that viewless thing! And then he had shadowy Margaret Walsingham upon her knees, and was behind her, and wound his left arm in the tresses of her long brown hair; and, as pale-faced Oswald watched with heart that did not beat and blood stagnant in his cold finger-tips, he saw the scoundrel in hideous pantomime drag back that fair head of his sweet English cousin which had lain so lovingly and light some once or more upon his shoulder, and bare her white, back-stretched throttle.

And then, as the wicked knife was trembling to the pretence of a wicked deed—as the very heel of that cruel steel seemed touching that invisible ivory skin, there came a light rustle on the stairs without, the curtains drew, and Morrogh the servitor, gliding in and holding those tapestries apart, with a deep obeisance said, "Lady Margaret Walsingham!"

With a cry of shame and fear he could not control, Oswald started back, and, covering his eyes with his hands, turned away, while the Greek, when that fateful name fell upon him, leapt to his feet and blanched until his yellow face and trembling thin lips were like the face and the lips of the dead. And there she stood, the true Margaret, in the black framing of the archway—the tall, sweet English girl that they had been butchering in dumb show; her raiment

travel-stained and worn; her pale, young face thin with new sorrow; her red eyes heavy and dark with weeping; her fair hands outstretched in eager greeting. In came that comely lady a pace, and stretched out those white arms towards De Montaigne, and "Oswald!" she cried, "dear friend and cousin!" and then another step, and a sob, and "Oswald!" again cried the lady, "dear cousin and refuge, see I have come to you for help and comfort,"—and so stood there and sobbed, and held out those soft white hands, and wept, and wondered, while gusts of shame and anger swept across the averted face of De Montaigne.

And then in a minute he had mastered himself, and, turning, with a last glimmer of the old, true cousinship, held out his strong kinsman arms in turn; and in another minute the beautiful English girl had fled to him, and, with her head upon his shoulder for a space, was letting out the long-pent grief within her heart. And Isaac Saluzzio, a little way apart, stood scowling upon them as, all unconsciously, he wiped clean his bloodless knife upon the corner of his gaberdine, and jerked it back into its sheath with a bitter and scornful frown.

CHAPTER II.

As soon as Lady Walsingham had regained her self-control she brought forward the handsome and bulky young Englishman, Andrew Hepburn, who had hung behind when she entered, and presented him to Oswald, the two knights blending their formal salutations with a coldness which, seeing that each had a comprehension more or less complete of the other's rivalry, was no less than natural. Oswald, in turn, with his mind but half made up to his desperate project, speaking to his cousin and waving his hand towards Saluzzio, said, "Give me leave on my part fair cousin, to make known to you this gentleman, my trusty friend and henchman;" and then, growing braver as the gambler spirit rose within him, he threw himself into the game, and—"as good a merchant of this rich city, cousin," he laughed, "as any in it. There is no one to whom the Brotherhood fly for help and counsel sooner when beset with difficulties, or when a cool head (and liberal hand) alone can succour them, than to our reverend townsman. Let my friendship commend him to

yours!" Then again, turning to her companion, he continued in a tone whereof the bitterness was hidden under a courteous cloak: "Sir Andrew Hepburn, this is a man in a thousand, for one like you, come newly to a stranger city. Every in or out of this Rhodes of ours, by day or night, is known to him; he has the ear of all that be great or merry here, and there is not one of us who could put a hand upon his heart and swear in truth he owed him nothing. Trust him in everything, and when you leave our city, which by Our Lady shall not be soon or easily I read in Isaac's eyes, you shall have that to ponder on which might well last you, though you lived to five score. Let him take you, Andrew, upon the terrace and show you our city spread below—it should be a pleasant sight for sea-weary eyes." And as Saluzzio, cap in hand, and punctuating every step with courtesies, acknowledged the introduction, and presently took the English knight on to those battlements whence they could overlook almost the whole of the famous citadel of St. John, the knight led the English girl to a luxurious Eastern couch piled with soft silks and gay shawls, and seating himself beside her, begged for a more minute account of all that had happened lately.

It were unnecessary to follow closely the narrative she gave De Montaigne, since it but filled in with fuller detail the news of that letter he had torn to fragments in his anger. And like the letter itself,

the stream of her gentle talk, full of constant allusion to the broad English acres now hers, and to him, the other man to whom she had given her heart, fanned the flames of Oswald's anger and disappointment, till his passionate spirit almost mastered his self-restraint. Somehow, in those few moments after they had newly met, he had half fancied, so strong had old memories rushed upon him with the sight of his cousin's face, that the old times had come back indeed—the golden prize was his, and that creeping Greek, with his infernal secrets and haunting knife, was but a black chimera after all. Margaret's head had been upon his shoulder for a minute, the loose brown threads of her hair had lain like lace on his martial cloak; he had felt the dropping of her tears as warm as rain in April on his ungloved hand, the lift of her gentle bosom against his soldier vest, and the scent of English anemones seemed to rise from his feet, and the vaulted timbers of that great room to overshadow them, just as the aroma of the English flowers had risen and the English oaks had lent them friendly shelter when they had parted thus and so, some few years back. It was the same girl he had wooed and won but a little time before—the same touch, the same voice, the splendid solution of those difficulties which hung thick and horrid in the very atmosphere he breathed, who had lain friendless and weeping in his arms; and his sanguine spirit had somehow cozened him for those few minutes

into thinking all was still well, and nothing changed.

It was to hear this fleeting hope justified by her own lips that he had sent Hepburn to look upon the town, and instead, Margaret was babbling of father and lover—shattering his golden hopes by every turn of speech, and showing him unconsciously that, of the many things much to her, Oswald—"dear cousin Oswald," "friendly cousin Oswald," "playmate, and once much more"—was least! He writhed and tossed himself about, and sweet Margaret thought it was all the tale that moved him so, probing his raw wounds to the bottom; and, grateful for the fraternal compunction which stirred him, locked white hands, whose touch itself was temptation, upon his arm, and whispered into the hungry ear of that proud and ruined soldier the tale of her princely heritance, the sum and extent of that magnificent dower lying fallow at her feet; then, turning, commended his rival to him in low, soft whispers, redolent of a strong woman-love, every accent of which fell like hot metal on Oswald's heart, and seared his better nature, until presently he could stand no more.

Leaping from her side, and striding to and fro, while he glared at the luckless lady as she went gently sighing on, "Fool!" he thought; "witless white jilt! could she not see, could she not guess, his needs, or how every word was gall and wormwood to him? Was it for any pricks of a brand-new

conscience he was to pour the wine of his life into the gutters, and spare this silly, senseless doll a pang or two? Did he love her one atom now?" he asked himself, and stopped and looked at the pale woman thrown upon his mercy; then as he turned away swore silently, what was but the truth, that the love he had borne for her was dust and ashes—for well or for ill that passion was dead in his heart. And following on that thought there came, in the sequence of temptation, the knowledge that that love so dead would make it all the easier to bend with a rough hand proud Lady Margaret to his needs, if she might be bent; and if not—— Oswald did not dare to finish the thought even to himself, but the bitter black flash of anger and sullen disappointment with which he turned from the hapless girl expressed only too clearly all that he left unspoken.

Meantime the game concerned the hospitaller much too nearly for him to prejudice its outcome by any hasty show of spleen. He was a poor actor, he knew; but happily for his cause those two who stood between him and salvation were poorer critics. So, smoothing down his face, and lending himself with the best grace which might be, he played patient listener once more; and Margaret, never guessing how she had moved his anger, or with what dreadful art she was forcing him along the road of shame and treachery, played into the hands of the grosser villain Saluzzio, who held her life as nothing

if, by taking it, he might recover a part of his rashly trusted gold.

When her story was finished they rose, and while Margaret spoke a word or two with Hepburn, Oswald took the Rhodian aside for a whispered consultation. As a result of their talk, the Count presently offered Lady Walsingham the use of the great chamber wherein they stood, with its curtained bed, after the fashion of the time, set back in a recess; and for companionship Saluzzio's only daughter Samana, who would be friend and handmaiden in one to Margaret while she stayed in the city; "and thus," the Greek had whispered to Oswald, "our golden bird will be in a strong cage of which we will hold the key and appoint the keeper." Such a scheme was not quite what Margaret would have wished. She hesitated for a time, dubiously asking her cousin if it were not better she went straight to the grand master and begged his fatherly advice and protection? But Saluzzio, who stood behind her in the shadows, shook his head, and Oswald rightly translating that, answered—

"Even were D'Aubusson willing to undertake the responsibility, our grand master's palace, Margaret, were a worse shelter for you than this. It is crowded from roof to cellar with noisy gallants from every court in Europe; material so combustible, fair cousin, that an inkling of your sweet presence in hall or corridor would set it all ablaze."

"Then could I not rest," she queried, "with some good yeoman's wife? Surely in such a city there must be some to whom you could intrust me, some honest house where I could lodge for the few hours I stayed here, and not put you to so much disturbance?"

But Oswald shook his head again, declaring it was no disturbance; he himself would find a soldier's couch somewhere below. So poor Margaret hung her head for a minute; then, consenting, took another fatal step.

"And now, dear cousin, we must remember what is due to your long voyage and weariness. If it rested but with our choice," said the Count, with that graciousness which suited him so well, "Hepburn and I could stay here indefinitely, but since it is otherwise, and your red eyes show how gladly you would sleep, we will go and leave you to rest until to-morrow. These honest but rough chamberlains," he added, as a couple of men-at-arms came in to make some slight alterations in the arrangement of the room, and place a pallet bed for the other woman in a recess beyond the further archway,—"these will fit the chamber for your use as far as may be; our good friend Isaac's daughter will be with you in a little time; and my own henchman, dull but faithful Morrogh, shall bring you supper. 'Tis but a soldier's hospitality, sweet cousin," he said with a sudden gentleness in his voice as the trustful girl laid her

white hand in his, "but, such as it is, 'tis all your own."

"And given," Margaret answered, "to a soldier's daughter, one who can relish a harder pallet than any here when strong hands, and loyal, loving hearts keep it secure! Good night, dear Oswald, and a pleasant to-morrow to both of us." And she stood looking after them as, taking up their swords and mantles, with a parting salutation, those two strong men, whose hopes both centred in her, made their homage at the curtain, and went clanking down the winding stairs.

She had forgotten Saluzzio, and when that slinking rogue, with eyes upon her and cap in hand, glided by after his master, she started, and a half-stifled cry broke from her lips while, horrible and clear, somehow the strange pantomime at which she had found him when she first entered rose before her. Saluzzio, too, stopped and hesitated, overwhelmed by her gracious beauty. It seemed as though he struggled to utter that something civil which stuck halfway down his throat; and Margaret, half extending her hand, drew it quickly back as swift instinctive repulsion conquered the generous impulse. And so, irresolute for a minute or two, they stood staring at each other, between whom was to be played the game of death and life, each held by some potent fascination in the other's eyes—Margaret seeking for something to say while a strange dull

kind of fear kept her tongue silent and useless, and the Greek cowed for a moment, it might be, by the queenliness of that fair presence in front of him. And so they stopped and stared, neither knowing how to break the charm, until impatient Oswald called from below—the spell was broken in a breath—and, with a leer and a last deep bow, Saluzzio too glided through the curtains and went down the turret stairs.

As the three men crossed the long narrow causeway which, running far out into the harbour, connected the isolated tower of St. Nicholas with the ramparts of the town, it was agreed the Rhodian's first care should be to find lodging—no easy task in that full town—for the English knight; and his next, to seek out and despatch his daughter to the solitary English lady. They tried several billets, but so crowded was every rest-house and hostelry that not even the name of De Montaigne or the cunning of the Greek, of whose wealth wondrous tales were told in the city, could obtain the Englishman lodging or shelter. Meanwhile the sun was going down, and the short eastern twilight was at hand. Oswald grew impatient, for, with the quaint illogic of those who err, though he might bear to think of his fair cousin brushed from his path by some desperate means, yet in the meantime he could not brook to leave her friendless, even for an unnecessary hour, in such a place. And thus, as they tried fruitlessly door

after door wherever a bush hung out gave false promise of rest and refreshment to the tired stranger, and the eastern shadows deepened in those gully streets, he presently stopped in his walk, for his eyes had caught sight of a neighbouring tressel, where, under an orange-coloured awning, a letter-writer sat amongst his inks and parchment, and an idea had come upon him.

"Saluzzio," he said, halting before that bench and taking a silver coin from his pouch, "this quest of ours looks as though it might go on till midnight, and meantime Lady Margaret sighs for the sweet companionship of that sainted daughter of thine. Now, Hepburn must be lodged, and it will take all thy art to do it, therefore sit you down here, dip thy paternal pen into this fellow's most persuasive ink, and let me have—not long but to the point—a letter to thy offspring. I will myself play messenger this once while you see to the other errand, and thus between us we may save the daylight."

"It is not fit, noble Count de Montaigne, that you should carry a poor merchant's letter like a running footman," said Saluzzio, in a tone of mock humility. Nevertheless he sat down at the notary's stall after a minute's consideration—dipping a new goose-quill into the public ink-horn—sanding the missive when it was done; and lastly, folding and tying it with a strand of yellow silk, presently handed it to the knight. That soldier frowned a little as, his pride

struggling with necessity, he stuck the thing into his girdle where his ample cloak would hide it, and listened to the Greek's directions for finding its destination. Then, when Isaac, secretly uneasy to think he had so far betrayed his citadel to one whom, even in the flush of his successful insolence and villainy, he feared and doubted, had paid the bowing white-robed Copt of pens and paper, he and Andrew Hepburn set out to seek for lodgings in a new quarter; while De Montaigne, without another word, threw his mantle haughtily across his shoulder and stalked away towards the southernmost part of the town.

Tall and sedate he strode along, through cobbled streets of quaint houses with painted gables and narrow windows, their walls converging until the sky was a blue streak pent in between the roof-tops. In those narrow ways dimly shining lanterns were slung on poles at night, and all day long strange signs and significances—necessarily abundant in an age when no one wrote—swung and creaked from the plastered walls. Down the centre of the wynd the kennels ran under the noses of the light-hearted Levantine people, who sat about upon their stalls amongst heaps of many-coloured merchandise, and laughed and chaffered with true Eastern happiness. Little traffic passed that way—when it did it was an episode of consternation and awe,—but now and then an ambling mule came stumbling along between the booths, the scarlet tassels on his ears dancing in

the sunshine, and on his back a stout merchant of Volo, perhaps, with toes stuck into great square stirrups of worked Damascus steel, and money wallet of Aleppo leather half hidden by his ample flowing cloak, and mild greedy eyes that were not to be lightly drawn from the visionary sums he worked upon the sunny house-sides by the shouting of his running boy behind or the pleasant hum of busy life about him. More rarely still, a mounted knight, his tall plumes stooping to the signs and symbols overhead, would pass clattering by, amid the hushed respect of Jew and Christian, citizen and vagrant; or a sumpter beast or two would pick their way, with well-stuffed pannier-bags, down the narrow thoroughfares leading by the nearest road to the distant gates of the great citadel.

The black robe of St. John was well known in these streets, in spite of the stern edict of grand masters and precentors; at any hour of the day, and most of the night, the flowing garments of the hospitallers were now and again to be seen mingled with the many-coloured crowd, and Oswald, in his long cloak, passed without special comment down the bazaar—deep in his own thoughts, and heedless alike of the scowl of Moslem slave or the murmured salutations of their Christian masters—until he reached a street where the bustle of the market had been diverted into another channel, and, save a chance passer-by now and then, and a dog or two

that foraged in the day's refuse heaps, nothing moved. Behind him lay the winding Eastern streets, where lanterns and evening fires were beginning to twinkle in the dusk, and in front opened up a wide square with its fringe of whitewashed, narrow-windowed, flat-roofed houses; and in the middle of the open space was a fountain tumbling into a green bronze basin, in the centre of a clump of orange and aloes and palms, whose long fine leaves rustled to a breeze overhead, so soft and warm that no other token but their tremulousness showed that air was moving.

The last of the sunshine was still gilding the faces of the houses upon one side of the square as Oswald stalked out of the shadows and paused to look about him, for here, if he had followed his directions well, was the place which Saluzzio had described. He stared round dubiously, for of "Moorish windows," such as he had been told to look for, there were a hundred, and of "awninged doorways" in the flat-fronted walls some scores. Away in the distance a few muleteers lay sleeping by their beasts under a piazza; and by the fountain, half hidden in the screen of leaves, a woman was sitting on the marble steps, feeding, while she sang a soft low song, a flock of pigeons, who fluttered about and stood upon her shoulders, or fed amongst the yellow grain below in happy security.

Then, as Oswald looked and hesitated, there

happened a little incident of large significance, if he could but have understood it. He had gone a few strides towards the woman at the fountain, meaning to ask her aid in finding Saluzzio's house and daughter, when a shrill cry echoed through the court, and as the feeding pigeons, knowing that sound too well, sprung wildly into the air a great falcon swept round the corner of the piazza. De Montaigne saw him check for a minute as he caught sight of those fluttering birds; and then, like a bolt out of the blue, like a stone from a sling, with wings half shut, and head deep sunk into the shoulders, and fierce bright eyes agleam, and crooked yellow talons gaping for the fatal clutch, the spoiler came shooting down through the air. A common fear nerved the pigeons' wings: they parted from before him like white foam from the bows of a ship, hurling themselves this way and that as the mighty bird flashed through them, and —missing by a hair's-breadth her he aimed at—went flashing up far into the air again. Oswald saw him hurled into space by the impetus of his rush; he saw in another moment his great barred tail spread black and white against the sky; he saw the quick turn of that hungry head, and the fierce sickle wings half opened, as, with a savage cry of wrath and hunger, the falcon swung round once more, and, dropping again like a meteor out of the pale evening air, flashed across the low sunlight like a black and golden javelin, and this time aiming at a dove of more sober

feather struck her with a thud that you could hear fifty yards away, and sent her green and silver plumage smoking out into the air, and her blood in a crimson shower unto the citron leaves below, ripping that harmless bird open from back to breast; and then, with an exulting robber-laugh that made even the sleepy mules look up, the gallant thief rose in easy spirals into the rosy sky, and bore the mangled body away to his watch-tower on the grey ledges of distant Chalce.

De Montaigne laughed, he and that kite were so much akin. A falconer himself, he loved a noble bird, and then he checked his laughter all on a sudden; for he heard a soft cry of pain and compunction from amongst the palm leaves, and, looking, there was the girl-owner of the doves wringing her hands, as she gazed after the receding robber, and continued crying on him for restitution, until the grey speck disappeared in the southward of the town, when, with a little moan and shudder, the girl sank back upon the white marble steps, and drawing her scarf across her face gave way to a flood of headlong grief.

Oswald de Montaigne was moved by that outburst of useless pity no less than by the girl's youthful grace, and, going up to the weeping figure, laid a hand lightly upon her shoulder; whereat she started as though it were the falcon's clutch itself and she the dove, then looked up, and thus those two met for

whom were in store the strangest episodes of love and disappointment.

Upon the head of the Greek, for such Oswald recognized her at once to be, close pressed into the wavy masses of raven hair, was a small cap of amber velvet, hung round the lower edge by a fringe of little silver bells, which rang at every movement with an elfin clatter as small and musical as the play of a stream on its pebbles. From her smooth round neck to her feet she was robed in soft white stuff, drawn in and fastened at the waist and ankles. On her feet were saffron-coloured slippers, with the curling points embroidered in turquoise and pearl. Round that dainty lady's middle a great scarf of amber silk was wound, with a tiny green-jade handled dagger stuck in one side, and hanging from the other her keys and housewife things. On her shoulders fitted closely a sleeveless pelisse of pea-green silk, edged with silver filigree and bells; while the long plait of black hair, as broad as a man's hand, that hung down behind it, was cunningly entwisted from crown to tag with green and golden ribbons.

As for the lady herself, they were great soft gazelle-like eyes into which the brother of St. John looked down, while the face that owned those eyes was that of a girl of nineteen or twenty—a smooth clean olive face, not faultless, perhaps, but nevertheless an excessively winning face, of tender outlines

and soft colours, that grew upon you with a gentle insidious charm none the less irresistible because the growth was slow. That fair girl's lips were as red as the coral of the hot Sidra Sea; her soft small nose had something Hebrew in its clear-cut outline; her broad black hair was strong and thick, and the bright hue of youth and health shone under her soft transparent skin. A tall, comely girl indeed, gentle and shy and soft, Oswald thought her, fair in her grief, and twice as fair when she started up under his light touch, and, flushing with surprise, drew her wrap closer round her shoulders, as she stood wonderingly before him in the tremulous shadows of the leaves.

De Montaigne noted the heave of that maiden bosom and the tremble of the supple fingers that held the Smyrna shawl across it; he saw the red lips so lightly parted and the tears ready to run from those downcast eyes, and he thought to himself that here was surely the freshest flower that ever his good luck had chanced upon. Margaret, the cold pale English girl, slipped from his unstable mind as quickly as March is forgotten in May, and approaching a little nearer, he gravely saluted the shy Greek maid, and began to talk of hawks and pigeons, all with such a nicely measured courtesy in his tone as went straight to her inexperienced heart. Besides, he was sympathetic, and, forgetting the falconer for the moment, called the kite a bully, and

praised her pigeons, their feather and carriage, asking how many there were of them, and where they nested; until the maid, standing there in the compass of his dark shadow, lifted up her head at all that gentle questioning, and, as uncertain as an April day, began to give shy answers, while she noted with a sidelong glance or two the form and fashion of the handsome soldier by her, and saw the unspoken admiration of those eyes whose gaze stirred her fibre with a sweet uneasiness.

De Montaigne's experiences were small of such modesty; it was something new to feel that child-woman answer to every inflection of his face and voice, and tremble and withdraw, and come forth again from the rosy seclusions of her shyness as her quick instinct translated each word and look he gave. Oswald, whose knowledge of her delightful kind had been all of the baser sort, who knew of no womanhood between the painted, mincing wantons of the court, and the black-browed slaves of camps—all oaths and tears and sullen hate,—felt a new pulse rise within him in that gracious, artless presence, a magic spell the touch of whose toils fell so lightly that at first he was scarce aware of them. And the other felt something of the kind, and, without a thought upon it, somehow and somewhere knew presently that this man was not to her as any other man—felt in some dim recesses of her virgin consciousness that the unchangeable sunshine, the

unchangeable sky, and the unchangeable earth about her had somehow changed a little for the better since he came.

It is a process that ripens quickly in an Eastern air. The doves went home, the deepening evening drew a purple veil between them and the too curious outer world; the leaves rustled softly all about; the silver mule-bells tinkled across the square; the water dripped cool and monotonous into the green bronze basin: forgotten was Oswald's errand, and still those two thought they could talk for ever in such circumstances. But presently Oswald touched by chance the scrip in his belt, and at once with a guilty start he was brought back to the active present. He paused for a minute, and then said—

"The pleasantest things, fair maiden, are oft interrupted by necessity, and this talk of ours, not the last I hope, must end. I have an errand to do, though that hawk and you have made me a laggard messenger. I was sent," he said, with mock humility, taking Saluzzio's note from his girdle and turning it over to read the superscription, "to deliver this to a damsel—a strange commission for a Brother of St. John,—into the hands of one who lives hereabouts: 'a white house with yellow awning blinds in the square that has the fountain.' Canst point out to me anything like that?"

"Indeed!" said the Greek; "that might well be my father's, yonder."

Oswald laughed. "If you knew the parentage you claimed you would not be so ready to assert it. This is for one who, if the child were like the father, should be both within and without crafty and crabbed, the cankered flower of a crooked stem—ugly, old, and wrinkled!" And smiling at the bare idea, he held the letter so low that the fair girl by him could just read in the twilight what was written thereon. Her soft, unlettered eyes pored over it for a minute, and her small mouth was pursed as she framed those ragged characters into articulate sound, until, at the second try, she gave a cry of pleasure, and held out a hand for that missive.

"Why, it *is* to me," she laughed,—"to me, from my father. I know his penmanship, though the ink is new. What does he say? Oh! I hope all is well with him."

"What, you Samana Saluzzio! You my swarthy henchman's daughter! Surely this is impossible!"

"Ah, sir," she said, demurely; "'jaundiced and wicked, ugly, old, and wrinkled.' Whether I come within your expectations or no, I am nevertheless her to whom the letter is addressed. Let me read it. Indeed, it is not once a year my father writes to me, and I am fearful——"

"Nay, dear Samana," said Oswald, recovering his presence of mind, "if, indeed, the incredible be true, and you are really whom you say,—that grim old stem from which you sprung—and Heaven forgive me

for reflecting on him in your presence—is well, and busy as usual with schemes for the benefit of some one or other of us. An English lady," he explained, helping out the sweet illiterate's understanding as she took and opened the letter and began to cipher, with studious care, the old Greek's warehouse arabesques —"an English maiden, my cousin, flying from the Turks, who burn and plunder all along the mainland, has come unexpectedly to Rhodes. She lodges in the watch-tower of St. Nicholas, and because she is lonely and needs a companion such as thyself (not to mention some other reasons with which I need not burden your ears)," he added aside, "thy father, ever forethoughtful, would have you come as quick as those amber feet can trip to the harbour tower, there to be solace to Lady Margaret's captivity; and," he thought to himself, "to be the means presently of her undoing, and out of very gentle heart and faithfulness to play traitor to my hapless cousin, giving her over in due season to thy butcher parent." Then turning again to the girl, he said aloud, "Is it agreed, sweet lady? There goes the warning note of a gun whose rude call to soldier duties I must not dally with; my comrades wait——"

"I go at once, sir," said the Greek. "I will but run back to our house yonder, and Mustaph, our man, shall carry the little that I need."

"Why do then, damsel," Oswald answered, bending over her as she turned to go. "We shall meet

again, indeed we must, and, with more leisure, ripen a friendship which begins so pleasantly; until then, good-bye, Samana. See! here's a keepsake for you until that happy moment," and stooping he picked a white spray of orange blossom from the nearest branch, and forced it into the small, brown hand that somehow he had got possession of. The girl felt him draw her gently down; she felt his other hand steal round her velvet middle until her head was all but on his shoulder, his breath upon her face, and those red lips he aimed at all but his; the very twilight seemed in conspiracy with him, it was so smooth and still, with nothing moving but the green lanterns of the fire-flies circling amongst the aloes, and the yellow planets mounting one by one into the sky above, and no sound but the chirrup of a distant cricket and the dripping of the water. For one moment she suffered that sweet infatuation, and then with a strong effort and a stifled cry she tore herself from De Montaigne's grasp, and, waiting not to say good-bye, fled across the square and gained the shelter of her father's porch.

Once within she hurried to her room in the inner corridors, and there, abandoning herself to a host of strange, new sensations, laughed and wept, and pressed Oswald's flowers to her lips and bosom; and, when the paroxysm was over, lit a little Moorish lamp, and, woman-like, went to look at herself in a tall mirror that stood near the arched doorway.

She looked—and started back, then looked again—and gasped, and gazed blankly on her hands and dress, and then at Oswald's flowers. Oh horrible and dreadful! the blood of that slaughtered bird of hers was upon them, her lips were red with a dreadful new redness, her dress was red, her hands stained to the wrist, and, worse and worse, Oswald's first love-gift, red as red could be, lay ominous and dreadful, at her feet!

She let the taper fall, and, hiding her frightened eyes behind those sorry fingers, burst into a flood of tears, which this time had nothing of pleasure in them.

CHAPTER III.

When the English girl's eyes opened the next morning in her turret chamber, the heavy fatigue of travel had been reduced by a long sleep to delightful languor. The rough mattress, stuffed with nothing softer than Smyrna hay, of her crabbed berth upon the ship, had been changed by sweet magic for such soft silken bedding, such ambrosial pillows and coverlets of Lyons silk, as made weariness itself a pleasure. And there, in luxurious comfort, under the warm new daylight, lay the comely Saxon heiress in soft white night-gear, her brown hair all down upon her shoulders, and stared sleepily around the great room, with its grey walls half hidden in purple tapestries, the white flagstone floor littered with costly Persian mats, the massive oaken benches set back by the heavy tressel tables, the mouldy pennons waving in the draught, the boar-spears crossed under grinning Stridio boars' heads, and piled arms and trophies over the broad archways. Everything was strange about her from the sombre four-post bed set far back in a heavy-curtained niche, its

carved ebony pillars at the corners near as thick as the mainmast of a frigate and purple velvet canopy above wondrously wrought in golden thread with ancient blazonry, down to the green Florentine oil-lamp upon a tripod in the corner, wherefrom, as she looked, the pale small flame went out in the rosy twilight, and a thin curl of lavender smoke rose before her heavy eyes in gauzy spirals to the dark labyrinths of the vaulted roof overhead.

She was nearly asleep again, and lay back on those ambrosial cushions and dozed. It was all so soft and still and pleasant. The mellow light, tinctured with scent of olive and orange blossom, was stealing gently into that great chamber, putting new dyes on tapestry and carpets, and regilding ancient brass and silver with a bright refulgence. The high arched casement that led out upon the battlements was uncurtained and open wide; and through it the soft Mediterranean air came, in tepid waves that stirred the heavy fringes of her couch and gently touched the fair girl's hair until the loose ends about her forehead lifted and shone brighter than any golden threads of blazonry above. And upon the green copper spouting over that Norman oriel a hoopoe was perched—an audacious bird, to whom maiden privacy was nothing; he strutted up and down and stretched his parti-coloured wings and curled an amber crest, and peeped and peered, until at last, with a chuckling cry, he dropped into space, and

went sailing away towards the millet-fields on the far slopes of Phileremos.

That laugh woke Margaret Walsingham. She sighed and rising upon her elbow stared out of the open window whence the bird had gone. Where was she she wondered once again; what meant those strange sights and sounds? And then, in sleepy, disconnected fashion, the events of the previous days came back, and the white tears collected slowly in her eyes as she thought of her father's death and her own loneliness. Before those tears could escape another thought crept into her mind, and alarm and perplexity for her own self took the place of the gentler grief as she gazed fearfully round the austere magnificence of that great chamber and recollected, with a heightening colour, that she was alone and without a guardian in a city the whispered tale of whose wantonness had spread even into her own green English shires,—alone for the first time in her life, and in the hands of a brotherhood for whom she knew the charitable could only pray that in the great end their spiritual valour for the sweet Christian cause might outweigh the certain dissoluteness of their temporal lives,—alone, and in all that gay and vicious city no one knowing so much as of her bare existence but those two men who—and she flushed a red flush under the tangles of her fair hair to remember it—had each in turn wooed and won her! With a timorous vow under her breath,

which the Fates laughed at, that she would sail for England before a second sun had risen, the girl slipped from her white couch, and, wrapping an Eastern shawl about her, went over to the wide window arch.

Little did she guess the terror and disappointment hidden behind the veil of the lovely picture upon which she looked. At her feet the blue waters of the harbour, stirred by the lightest of breezes, flashed in gold and sapphire round the long embattled sweep of the ramparts stretching away landward on either hand; and over the glitter of the water, waist-high up those strong seaward-facing walls, the early morning mist lay in a thin pearly flooring of fine vapour, hiding the bay beyond the harbour mouth, and lying amongst the minarets and roofs of the town itself, —a soft milky sea through which stately domes and cupolas, tall roofs, and porticoes cropped up on every side like islands in a fleece-white ocean. Round the green slopes of St. Stephen's hill, to the southward, the mist stretched in strands that lay about amongst the olive orchards and followed the windings of terrace, garden, and vineyard steps till both mist and land melted away far into the golden grey of the east.

So much Margaret saw as she turned delightedly from point to point, and then the red lip of the sun, hot and splendid in that world of soft lights and shadows, came out of the furthermost sea; and as he

rose up majestically the sky overhead flushed with crimsons and yellows, the warm glow crept down over the surface of the lawn-white vapour till the mist was a rippling carpet of tenderest rose-colour, a soft rayless sea of pale damask and amber with the glint of the playful waves shining through, like stars through the thin screen of the night clouds. And inland, the marble terraces and burnished copper domes of the stately citadel flashing like royal gems against the velvet green of the cypress groves behind!

It was so still the lady could hear the steeds neighing at their corn in the grand master's palace-yard, and count each footstep of a warden on the flagstones of a distant turret, and mark the chatter of the sea-fowl at the harbour mouth, and the chirrup of the quails in the Cosquino corn plots! Brighter and brighter grew the flush, and stronger and stronger the yellow light of the morning, until presently there came a breath of wind out of the east, the vapours that the sun had first painted prismatic and then frayed out to the thinness of gossamer were rolled away by that southern air, and with extraordinary suddenness, like the lifting of a veil, the town and the sea and the hills beyond were all clear to her.

Of what followed, not one line or jot ever faded from the memory of the English girl. As the curtain of the morning lifted she gazed round with the flush of pleasure on her face and murmured words of praise to the Giver of all good things upon her lips;

and then with a start and a cry she stared hard at the sea for a minute, and cried again, and looked and rubbed her wide-open eyes as though she thought surely last night's weariness still sat upon them, and looked again, and again! All round from where the low hills of the mainland lay grey on the northern sky, round to Meis and its even capes standing like sentinels in the south, the blue ridge and furrow of the laughing Ægean was crowded with Turkish sail—a flashing glittering fleet, line beyond line and tier beyond tier, more numerous than the white-winged birds under Cape Anamur in May time; a splendid, unnumbered flotilla that pitched and tossed on the short, gold-laced waves of the morning with quaint pictured sails stretching to the freshening wind, and crescent flags straining at a thousand taper masts, and banks on banks of oars that frothed the water into a mimic storm as their countless blades fell and rose again each moment, wet from the Rhodian spray, into the sunshine. Even here she could catch the hum of the rowers and the whistle of the captains and the babble of the voices as that great fleet, horrible and beautiful, manned by devils and fair enough to have sailed straight from heaven, put a silver cincture round the sea, and presently came to anchor a mile from the outermost defences of the environed town.

Margaret Walsingham watched the progress of those stately squadrons with the fascination of a bird

that sees the smooth coils of the snake wind themselves across her only means of escape from a dreaded peril. She turned in a minute with a stifled gasp of terror to the land, and there a new surprise awaited her. All those vine and olive-clad slopes, marked out with pleasant garden places and dotted with white shrines and cottages, that had lain hidden since the previous evening in mist were now bare, and to Margaret's fearful eyes they seemed all a mighty camp that took up the circle on the far shore where one horn of the Turkish fleet rested, and carried it over hill and valley to the southern bay and the other extremity of the anchored armada. Terrace beyond terrace, and step above step, the round hill-slopes were marked with long lines of booth, and hut, and tent. Down in the hollows, where the white water glanced through the brown summer grass, stood a frowning town that was not there yesterday. Near by she could see the tent-cloths of Aksorai and Ishkehdoon strained behind every lift and shelter of the rocks, high up, far on the mountain-side, the ground was particoloured with the painted camel-cloths of feudatories from the lonely shores of Urumia and Kermanshah! She could see the rice smoke curling blue out of every copse and hollow from a thousand fires, and the glint of spear and buckler behind every tamarisk bush and ruined shrine; the sleek cavalry of Aleppo and sandy Kerek were grazing in dun herds, like forest deer, on the grassy patches between

the Christian gardens, while the pointed flags and gonfalons of *jenkji* and *yuz-bashi*, of *biyuk* and *shehzado* made that fair hillside like a blossoming garden.

It was so sudden, so unexpected, so horribly beautiful, that Lady Walsingham could scarcely believe for a space it was not a mirage or a waking-dream. She was still gazing in wonder all about her when, to justify her eyes, came the evidence of her ears. It was sunrise. The bottommost edge of the great orb lifted from the water as she looked, and in a moment, clear, and thin, and fine, shrilly unconscious of the black infidel circle that was drawn round the town, the silver bells of St. Anthony rang out for matins; and in another second the listening ears of the English girl could catch, away in the distance, the Turkish muezzins calling to prayer from every vantage point amongst the rock.

"La Alláh, illá llah!
Muhammad rasuluhu!"

came small and fine upon the breeze to her. And there they were, Christian and Moslem, saying grace before the bloody work that was to follow.

Margaret no longer doubted: the free, great world that was at her feet last night had suddenly shrunk to the poor few acres these white walls shut in,—her life, her honour, everything at the mercy of that princely band of soldier-priests, with whom chance had thrown her lot; and without, a bow-shot through the cypress groves, were leagued those she turned

sick and faint even to think of, an indomitable host whose deeds of cruelty and rapine had blanched cheeks and made maid and matron tremble from east to west of Christendom. She no longer doubted, and turning with a heavy heart back into her room, threw herself upon her knees under a dusty image of the Mother and Child, that stood neglected in a niche of the wall. Not for long had that shrine heard such heartfelt prayers for countenance and aid as those wherewith the lonely English girl invoked it. And as she knelt there in her thin drapery, with eyes full of fear and perplexity, her loose brown hair shining like golden coils in the sunshine on the floor, and her rosary pressed close between her tight-shut hands, the roar of the awakening town rose in a quickly swelling murmur athwart her prayers.

Already the stern demand of the Turkish commander, brought in at first streak of dawn, to surrender the town, had been received and returned by D'Aubusson and his knights with an equally haughty defiance; and now the angry notes of the retiring herald's trumpets had started the stately city from her sleep, and all her citizens were rushing to the walls to see their peril laid out before them in a way the newest novice in the art of war could understand. Margaret heard amongst her prayers the roar of that rising torrent and the patter of innumerable running feet, as every lane and byway

sent down its tributary streams to join the crowd that surged through the market-place towards the points whence the slopes of the green western hills could be seen—and the syllables of her prayer died away upon her lips. The very air seemed electric with anxiety. She *could* not pray, but again sprang to her feet and went to the battlements.

The town below was seething like an ants'-nest in June; the sky overhead was full of whirling flights of frightened pigeons that rose, a white drift, from the dove-cotes of the city, while the clamour of the people came up to her from below in a confused roar, like the sound of a storm amongst the stony cañons of a mountain. She clapped her hands to her ears and leant back against the archway. It was horrible, and yet magnificently exhilarating to her English blood, her eyes brightened, her colour came and went, her breathing was hard and quick, she could scarcely keep herself from shouting with the seething, shouting mob throbbing in every vein of the startled town below. With silent eagerness the imprisoned girl noted every detail as she leant over the stony coping. Already on the white ramparts she could see the defenders swarming like bees; the sombre garb of St. John all patchwork with the gay liveries of feudatories and allies. She saw the glint of armour now and then in the eye of the sun, and the gleam of waving groves of spears as Lombard and Florentine mercenaries trooped down the ringing streets; she

saw the pennons dance and gleam upon the walls as one by one Provence, and Aragon, and Auvergne shook out their blazons to the breezes and sent cheer on cheer thundering across the sandy sea flats; she noted far away the proud soldier-monks of France clustering darker and darker upon the steps of the master's palace, and the green and silver of Castile lining the harbour mole. Beyond them again, the clamorous Italians were mustering on the southern foss; she saw the English pennons as thick as poppies in corn on the bastions flanking the main gate, and between the roofs of the town the German thanes crowding to the Amboise wall; and beyond them, again, over the porticoes and minarets of the city, the green open country, the olive orchards and the terraces, the yellow dust that hung over the endless lines of labouring Moslem convoys, the tented city, the glint of gold and brass amongst the rose gardens.

It was a wonderful and martial sight; but before she was half satiated, while Margaret still gazed with dreadful delight upon the shifting picture, there came a puff of white smoke upon the near slope of St. Stephen's hill, a hollow thunder new to her ears smote through the uproar all about, and the first gun of the great siege had been fired. She saw something hang over the town, and held her breath as it dropped; another instant and it fell crashing through an Oldenburgh armourer's red-tiled roof, and all that roof seemed hoisted for a moment in the air, it shivered

into matchwood and down came the fish-tail tiles into the clattering street, scores and hundreds of them, and bricks and beams and mortar in a pitiful avalanche, and as the dust rose from the ruins, Margaret heard, like a great sob, the wail of the Eastern women crying with one voice from every quarter of the beleaguered city.

Another shot followed soon, and as it went screeching overhead the doorway arras in the turret chamber were pushed hastily aside, and in rushed poor Samana Saluzzio, her dark hair loose, her dress disordered, one yellow slipper gone, and fear and terror playing on her face. She caught sight of Margaret advancing wonderingly to meet her—for Margaret had thought she was still asleep in the little ante-room where she had established herself the night before,—and, flying to her, clasped that lady round the knees, and gasped out, "Alas! alas! All is lost; the Turk—the Turk is come!" and wept and wrung her hands so wildly, that for a time Margaret could get nothing from her but tears and groans. She suffered the girl to collect herself, then, raising her to her feet, kissed and soothed that trembling Greek until breath and sense came back. Then, shunning the window, and screaming every time the thunder of a gun echoed from the hills, Samana told her tale.

"Oh, dear lady, I have dreadful things to tell! I had but gone to the market to buy fruit for us—for I dare ask nothing of the troopers who keep the

basement here. The town slept, the dawn was red, the cocks crowed; and as I tripped through the great square where the first stalls were being uncovered, never dreaming of a horrible enemy without, sudden from a by-postern of the Citadel a messenger rushed forth, and then another and another, all winged with fear and speed, their lips tight shut, and haste and fear in their looks. They rushed through us, who huddled into groups and stayed our chaffering by stall and booth, each on his errand; and ere we had formed a thought of what it meant, the great gate of the Citadel itself was flung wide, and out galloped six Moslems. Our hearts curdled to see them, madam,—swarthy men with proud dark faces, all on grey steeds, their numdah clothes green and gold, their clattering scabbards aglow with gems, tall, egret plumes rustling in their brazen helms, and a great silk banner with the cruel red Moslem crescent shining on it fluttering above them. They galloped through the market square, madam, like a flight of white sea-mews; and then, on the furthest bound, he—the Turkish herald that was their captain—wheeled round (I never saw any man ride as he did), and, rising in his broad gold stirrups, shook his steel gauntlet back at the holy porch of St. John—shouting something so dark and savage my blood stood still to hear it,—and then was gone after his companions.

"It was like a dreadful dream that comes between

star-down and twilight, lady! The warning messengers had sped to every *langue* and *auberge*, and the brave Nazarene soldiers leapt to arms and came hurrying into the streets till every way was choked with them; and still the news spread, and men ran here and there, crying, 'To arms, to arms! the Turk is come!' and others who heard them sleepily fled away, crying, 'To arms! the town is lost, the Turk is here!' And men began to blab, as they jostled shoulder to shoulder, of wondrous things that had not happened—how, I heard one say, a great battle had been fought, and lost, in the night; another, who mayhap had seen the tails of the Turkish steeds, vowed the citadel was taken,—ah, by Abraham, lady! he knew the very hour when it had fallen;—and yet another mended that tale by swearing D'Aubusson's head was blackening on a pole over the north wall of the harbour! Louder came the clamour, and louder and louder the trumpets blew, and deeper and deeper the press, as spearmen and halberdiers and squires hurried to the walls. My basket of grapes was torn from me in the ruck—and they were the only grapes in all the market; my plaited hair came uncoiled; I was spun round like a leaf on a swollen river. Oh, it was terrible and bewildering. All the dove-cotes were empty, and the cocks and hens cackling on the eaves; the droves of odious swine coming to market broke loose, and a herd, carrying shame and contamination with them, went charging

through the Jewish quarter; unfed kine ran lowing here and there, stalls were overturned, booths wrecked. And down the streets came the tide of the spears, and the footmen, and the great captains on their strong war horses were dotted about like burnished islands in the tawny river of many-coloured liveries that glinted and flashed and surged about them in wild disorder. Oh, I should have fainted, sweet lady, for certainty!" gasped poor Samana, with the tears rising anew into her eyes, "but for that first gun; it frightened me to life. I saw the cruel shot fly, and heard the tiles rattle, and, screaming with all my might, got struggling from the press, and ran with my heart in my mouth—thinking for certain the Turks would see and shoot at me—I knew not whither!"

"Poor maid!" said Lady Walsingham, stroking the soft dark head that nestled so fearfully to her. "You must, indeed, have been frightened. Came you back safely afterwards?"

"Safely, madam! Oh, look at this bleeding wrist of mine, my rent dress, and sandal gone!—there is more and worse to tell. I burst from the main crowd, and ran headlong down one alley and up another, intent only on escaping from the tumult behind, and soon came into a labyrinth of narrow lanes where I was utterly lost. I strove to find a way out, but could not, staying my tired feet at last, breathless and at bay, in a lonely court between the

houses. It was grey and solitary and deserted in the early sunrise; the wide Genoese eaves shut out the sky, the clothes hung dank with morning dew from cords stretched overhead, the signs creaked on their rusty iron scrolls. 'Twas a bad street, I thought, where no woman should be; and, so thinking, I set off to run quickly up it towards where, at the further end, a wide open square shone bright in the sunshine through a wooden-arched tunnel-way. I had near got to the arch when out of a dark shadow sprang a man, an odious cut-throat villain, in frayed red cap and doublet, who seized me by the wrist. I screamed, and in a trice another man had me on the other side; and they dragged me, madly struggling, back to where a couple more, and the wickedest old hag I ever looked upon, were prising open a stolen treasure-chest.

"'What have you there, bully?' laughed one of those; 'a rich merchant, sneaked home before the modest daylight shines too curiously upon his footsteps?'

"'No!' answered the brute who held my wrist; 'but something that may profit us as much as many merchants. Look here, you fellows, here's a pretty bird to be down this way so early.' And he forced me against a wall, while the others crowding round, stroking my hair with their wicked fingers and patting my cheeks, until presently the old hag pushed them all aside, and, with arms akimbo, looked

me in the face and up and down in a way that made my blood thrill. Her very glance filled me with disgust and horror. Think, then, what I felt when she linked her lean arm in mine, saying—

"'Come, my pretty, come with me; the raw morning air is not good for such fresh roses as yours. See! I have a house close by which, if it is not much to look at, is popular with many brave gentlemen. You shall be lodged there like a princess, and the poets who share this quarter with us shall make you love songs to beguile your leisure moments. There, come along, my pretty; it serves no purpose to weep and struggle. You shall have red slippers, I say, and a silk bed, and a new dress, if you will be but reasonable—and keep the best company in Rhodes. Nay, you she-cat! Help, Denny, help, or she will tear my eyes out!'

"I would not listen to her more, and fought and struggled so that my cries were quickly stifled with a foul rag a man forced into my mouth, and, half carrying and half pushing, they got me towards a noisome alley, leading I knew not whither.

"Just as I—struggling fiercely, wildly—was come to the mouth of that black lane, and a fate I durst not think of even now wanted but another moment to engulf me, I saw a horseman riding by the patch of sunshine in the open way beyond.' 'Twas but a chance—a thought; but, strong in my terror and shame, I tore one bleeding wrist from him who held

it, and, snatching the bandage from my mouth, screamed at the top of my voice, 'Help, Christian! help!' And he heard it," said Samana, with a fearful shiver,—"praise to the good God, he heard it. I saw him draw rein, and stoop, and peer through the narrow tunnel-way, and then I saw him swing his grey charger's head, and yank his golden rowels on his side, and down he came thundering through the tunnel, madam, his morion cap between his horses' ears—the cross-bent timbers were so low,—his wide cloak flying behind him like dusky wings, his empty scabbard ringing at every furious stride of the noble beast he sat. Oh, lady, never was there music in my ears so sweet as the thunder of that good steed in the narrow path! never had my eyes seen a sight so blessed as the red sparks his flying hoofs churned from the cobble stones! And then, in a moment, the champion was amongst us. I scarcely know what happened; there were screams and oaths, knives flashed about me, a good broad sword glittered and fell some once or twice—and I was free. The villains had gone, and in their place the Christian soldier, bending down from saddle-bow and lightly laughing at my tears, was shaking his hither foot from stirrup and inviting me to mount by it behind him!"

"A good deed," burst out Lady Walsingham; "and well done! What was the name of the strong soldier to whom you owe so much?"

Some fine unreasoning instinct made Samana hesitate for a moment. Again Margaret asked her; and then, with a sweet shy shame, hanging her head while the bright colour rose to her cheek, she said softly with downcast eyes—

"He who risked his life so readily for mine was your cousin, Lady Walsingham, Count Oswald de Montaigne."

Margaret saw the blush and the embarrassment on the transparent face of her companion, and wondered; but before she could ask more the Greek with gentle precipitance changed the subject of their talk, and, seating herself upon a cushion, while the first thunders of the storm were booming without, stole her arm round the waist of her new English friend, and dropping her soft olive Eastern fingers into the white Saxon palm, and drooping her head upon the other's shoulder until the black hair and the brown were gleaming together in the sunshine, lifted her shy bright eyes to Margaret's face, and sought her friendship.

Little did either think how close the net was drawing about them, or by how strange a chance she, who only yesterday had implanted a new love in Oswald de Montaigne's unruly heart, was thrusting herself between him and the woman upon whom his fortunes hung, no less than between her father and that girl whose life he was ready to spill like a cup of water.

CHAPTER IV.

All through the anxious days that followed, the frightened girls kept to the seclusion of their room, talking one to another in whispers, while the big guns boomed without, and the iron shot screamed over the clustering masts of the shipping in the harbour. Hour after hour the Turks had set up new culverins and bombards on every vantage point, and roofs had rattled, and walls splintered, until so incessant had grown the uproar that anxiety itself gave out. Even Samana no longer cowered at each shot, and Margaret scarcely checked her talk for a moment as the thunder of the discharges shook battlement and turret.

Towards evening, one day about a week after the siege had commenced, the cannonade died down, echo by echo, and a welcome peace fell upon the city later on; the fearful doves, who thought the war was done, came dropping home by twos and threes; the white smoke went tailing out to leeward until it was a long fair island in the far grey sea, and once more the girls could breathe and eat in peace.

They made a frugal meal that night, and then, when Morrogh had removed the cloth from the tressel table, and touched with a wisp of glowing rushes he brought from the basement fires for the purpose the slender wicks in each of the little Greek oil-lamps standing upon their tripods against the wall, and was gone again with his duteous bow, Margaret, who loved the fresh air with a fervour her companion knew nothing of, rose and, throwing a light shawl about her shoulders, went, as she said, to make the circuit of the tower and sit a space under the star-light. So forth she went into the darkness, to think many thoughts and watch the white stars trembling in the smooth dark harbour-water far below; while Samana, left alone, let her head drop upon her hand, and her own fancy stray idly back to the events of the last few days, and paint again, on the grey walls that the lamp-light illumined so dimly, the champing steed, the brave rider, and the *mêlée* of her deliverance from deadly peril that first morning of the siege.

Indeed, they had been no common days to her. Tender and shy, all her life had been lived in a rosy-coloured seclusion into which scarcely a breath of the fierce clamour and contentions of the outer world had ever penetrated. The redeeming point in Isaac Saluzzio's villainies had been an abiding all-engrossing tenderness for his child. He loved her with a fierce excess of affection, wonderful and

touching. All that goodness which never quite dies in any man had centred about that dark-eyed remembrance of the long-dead mother, his single white keepsake saved immaculate from the time when the sun had shone sweet for him upon a world of colour and love, when he had reverenced gods above and lived in fellowship with men below. Nothing was too good for Samana: no fairy palace that afreets of the mystic old world—upon whose shore he could see eastwards from Rhodes, a faint white line, the Ægean waves tumbling—could have fashioned for her out of gold and ivory would have been shrine sweet enough, his heart said, for that priceless bud. The very ground she stood on grew sacred to him; the very vestments she had worn, and which his assiduous fingers had picked from heaps of soft eastern stuffs upon the stall in the bazaars as least unworthy of her notice, were saintly relics to him. No new acolyte in the first entrancement of his dedication ever trod more softly to a shrine than the lean yellow Greek went each morning to rouse his daughter in that white curtained niche in the women's corridor where she lay. A niche!—it was a temple to him; and at times, when the maid had been away with the Rhodian women picking the red vines of Istrios, or feasting amongst the olive woods of Mendereh, he had gone at night to the vacant chamber, and stood a space inside the curtain, silent, with bent head, conning

over and over in his wicked, loving heart the sweet perfections of her who was not there,—letting her absence plumb with a fine bitterness the unmeasured depth of his love, whetting his longing for her recoming by those moments of gentle loneliness, until sometimes he would step over to the maiden couch, and, more like a lover than the one he was, would press his reverent lips against the white fringe of her pillow, and rise, and sigh, and, muttering a benediction, turn presently to his own sleeping-place.

Abroad he watched Samana's every footstep, and at home he lavished caresses, dresses, trinkets, and all the pretty playthings dear to maids upon her. And she submitted to his vigilance, though scarcely knowing why 'twas needed, as grateful proof of his tender paternal care; taking, too, the rich stuffs, the dainty slippers, the pearl-encrusted girdles he lavished on her as so many gay playthings, and, laughing, would throw her arms about the neck of the giver, kissing his fond, wicked old cheeks, and calling him the kindest, best of fathers while she put on the pretty things to please him for an hour and then forgot them, or, with a reckless charity, born of small knowledge and much heart, passed purple Tyrian stuffs margined in gold, royal Egyptian cloth glittering with ancient Theban symbols, or green Cyprian webs woven all over in silk as white as the foam which once bore the great Mistress, on

those hungry, grinning beggars, who sat and whined and scuffled all day long in the hot dust beneath her casement.

A sweet girl she was, tall, as has been said, and graceful, with a fair soft skin whose ivory white had scarcely yet been stained to a darker hue by the warm Mediterranean sun. Her long black hair coiled in loose luxuriance upon a shapely head; and the gentle, smiling eyes, and tender mouth of that sweet Southern damsel seemed only made for an atmosphere of love and seclusion. No wonder the old Greek felt the glamour of her companionship, and acknowledging through his callous skin the magic in the touch of those soft fingers, felt a breath of the spring of life come again to him in the warm fragrance of her duteous kisses. It was no wonder that base panderer to the needs of the dissolute, he to whom all the by-ways of lust and cruelty and rapine were familiar as the cobbled pathway outside his green painted door, should encircle the smooth unruffled virginity of that child of his with magic sanctity. For her he had worked, for her he worked still; for her he had joyed over the spoils of many a black deed; for her he had contrived and schemed and plotted, and had been sordid that she might be generous, and cruel that she might be compassionate; for her, through long dusty years of toil, he had pillaged and plundered and cheated, had heard unmoved the sigh of poverty and misery, and, fresh from foresworn bonds and friends

betrayed, had listened each evening to her prattling tales of kindly charity.

No wonder that the fair girl, to whom everything beyond her Moorish lattices, her fountain, and her pigeons, until to-day was strange and dreadful, sat pensive and sad now that the keen excitement was over for a minute, and a hush that was more irksome in its intensity than the turmoil had settled down with the darkness. Again she thought of her father, and idly speculated on the cause that had prompted him, even for a space, to let her from his sight; then she thought again of Oswald, and, while she let her fancy roam, the time slipped by, until presently a strange step came upon the stairs, a martial tread, yet so absorbed was Samana in her reverie that she neither heard nor moved, but sat passive, back to the light, her elbow upon the amber cushions of the couch and her head upon her hand, dreaming, as her kind will dream, until the very object of her speculation lifted the curtain, and, seeing her so, as sweet a maid as man could look upon, stood silent for a space.

It was but a wholly unexpected chance, and yet no deep-laid scene could have fanned the new love that was beginning in his heart more than that glimpse of the beautiful girl lying in sleepy gracefulness amongst the silken cushions. From time to time, amid the ruck and hurry of the week, her face had been outlined to his mind upon the grey smoke, and here she was alone, sweeter than he had thought,

exhaling, like a night-flower, an odour of love and tenderness in the soft shine of the pale lamp-light. He advanced cautiously, thinking she slept indeed, yet not so lightly but that, when he was a pace away, the girl heard him for the first time, and started, and looked up into a handsome soldier face full of an admiration undisguised and undisguisable. Samana, all soft blushes and confusion, rose to her feet in haste, and, with averted face, began to shyly excuse her dulness in not hearing the coming steps upon the stairs; how that a long day had made her weary, she said, and much to think of had overcome her watchfulness. Whereat De Montaigne, saying laughingly, "The best silk scarf in all this town, lady, if you will but tell me what those thoughts were?" possessed himself of a small olive hand, while he tried to read the answer in her downcast eyes. But the Greek, all too conscious of what the fancies had been, would not answer him, but laughed in turn, and, with a little struggle and a gesture of half-hearted anger, freed at last her fingers from his clutch.

"Well, then," he said, "I will not press you—it is hardly fair; and yet, believe me, Samana, I would give very much of that little that I own to know if I myself had been amongst those fancies. Nay, that angers you; then let it go for a moment. And now, dear maid, lend me those kind brown fingers to unloose this gear of mine," and the hospitaller proceeded, with the help of the girl, to rid himself of the

splendid fighting livery of his Order. Off came his cross-handled sword and scabbard; he put his helmet on the table; and then Samana took from him the ample black cloak with the white, eight-pointed cross upon the shoulder, which, except when actually going into battle, the Order wore above their armour. Down went his gorget and cuirass; he threw aside his heavy steel gauntlets, and, taking the gold spurs from his heels, ran his hands through his black hair with a sigh of relief and pleasure. Then, looking round the room, the thirsty Brother of St. John saw a jug of Cyprus wine, a drinking cup, and a dish of figs which Morrogh, more mindful of old habit than appreciative of the lesser needs of ladies, had put according to custom upon a small side-table. From the jug the soldier filled himself a beaker that Samana who had never been on close acquaintance with heroes before, thought was deep enough to drown any common mortal's soul.

But Oswald lifted it to his lips, crying as he did so the toast of his old Freelances, "Bright eyes, sharp swords, good steeds!" drank it to the bottom without a pause. That wine washed the dust of long hours out of his throat, and gave point and emphasis to the admiration with which his fair companion filled him. He came back to her, and, throwing himself upon a footstool at the lady's feet, utterly forgetful of Margaret and the schemes which this new folly threatened, began to tell of the forces

without and within that beleaguered town, inundating the Greek's unfamiliar ear with martial terms and pictures of war and knightcraft till the bewildered girl shrunk in fear from the bare recital and dimly saw Oswald through the dust and glitter of the preparations, the grey smoke and the confusion, stalking a paladin in steel and silk, overtopping all other Christian princes like a new hero more beautiful than Paris, more dreadful than Achilles. And then presently De Montaigne began to talk of gentler things, of himself and her, of their strange recent meeting, and the certainty that they must see much of one another for some time to come; and, so fascinated had Samana been by the light of those handsome eyes that watched hers so closely and the dreadful tale of those preparations through which Oswald in her fancy stalked, a demi-god terrible and splendid, that it was only then that she became conscious how near it was that he sat to her, that one hand of hers lay in his, and one soldier arm had ventured all but round her amber-belted waist. She blushed, and slipped those strong fetters shyly from her; but the hospitaller, nothing daunted, and flushed by the strong wine, came again to the attack, drawing closer and closer, and sinking his voice lower and lower, until it was no more than a whisper in her ear. Again the strong arm crept round that slim middle, and the imperious hand had found hers. Her bent head, dropped to catch the whispers of the other, was perilously near

to his shoulder; the small golden slipper-point was nervously tracing the pattern on the Smyrna rug; the black hair lifted now and then upon the warm outside draught that came creeping in to them full of strange scents; the small face was flushed and hot as those two sat together in the yellow taper twilight.

It was a new experience to Samana, and the incense of Oswald's flattery mounting to her head and heart fairly bewitched her. Outside, in the city, some desperate revellers whom nothing could daunt were singing drunkenly to the stars as they staggered home; the little owls were hooting now and then amongst the gravestones amid the cypress gardens on the point; a giddy lantern-fly was tapping aimlessly about the room, and the water lapping on the rocks far down below. But Samana heard none of them. All her impulsive Eastern nature was thrilling responsively to that headlong wooer at her side, that sweet Frankish soldier, who had shattered the golden leisure of her child-life and made her woman by a word. Presently she dimly heard him talking in her ear of a new existence somewhere; of lonely islands, where seas were always smiling and skies were ever blue; of green solitudes in the sweet-scented twilight of orange groves, and fair wildernesses where no man questioned or cavilled, and where two, so he said, might lie abask for ever, surfeiting in each other's love, and never weary.

It was a sweet, dangerous dream she listened to, yet

scarcely knew even then what the soldier meant she was so young in love, but listened, and listened, and sighed—ay, and pressed his fingers lightly, all of which emboldened him so that somehow it happened in a moment of delicious anger and shame, he had possessed himself of her altogether, and had drawn her down until her head and its black hair was resting on his shoulder, and had enveloped her in those strong arms of his, and, overweening, had lifted the shy brown face to his, and kissed her twice, before she knew it, on the lips. What! kissed by a Nazarene, kissed by a half-sworn priest, kissed by a man who had not known her yesterday—kissed unasked, and ere leave given!—the fair Greek's maidenness flew to arms at that. She leapt to her feet, and, springing away, confronted him a space, her head tossed back, her eyes blazing with Hellenic fire, her small hands clenched; and, forgetting the Frankish speech in that wrath that was half real and half delightful play, she burst out into a torrent of her mother tongue—calling him base, cruel, discourteous—a stain on his Order—a sully to knighthood—wanton, treacherous, unkind, —then paused a minute in that wild flood of words, and sought for some word harsher than any spoken yet, and could not find it in her gentle vocabulary; and checked, and halted in mid-stream of wrath, looking piteously to Oswald for a minute, as though to say it were not generous he did not help her to what she needed; and so broke down and turning,

fled weeping through the curtained doorway to her own inner chamber, whence there came immediately the sound of keys turned, and indignant bolts shot into their hollows.

Reckless as Oswald was he did not attempt to follow Samana into her sanctuary but stood there on the threshold half angry and half amused. How fascinating she was! he thought; how inexplicable her blushes and tears! That she was not indifferent to him he knew, and the slight encouragement she had given fanned his ardour; even the Greek's very efforts to conceal her feelings, no less than her anger just now, were new to one to whom many fair cities had capitulated even before a siege was well begun. He walked to and fro, half hoping, as lovers will, that the maid was already relenting and in a minute would be back again; longing, meantime, that his eyes could pierce the screen parting them, and tell him what she did,—whether she listened for his footsteps, whether she wept, or whether—what a wooer hates—she busied herself dry-eyed with trifles, seeming thereby to have clean forgotten him?

But Samana did not show; and soon, speaking to himself aloud, he began: "Foolish girl! unkind, unduly coy! have I done nothing for her that she should smother my love with so much maidenness? Foolish and timid! Does she think, because I wear this dull plumage for a time, and am partly vowed by barbarous rules to a pedantic brotherhood, that my

blood runs old and thin, and a solitary bed in a grey monk's cell is the saintly limit of my hopes? Surely she must see how strong my love has grown even within these few hours, and understand, untold, how gladly I would throw cape and cope, vestment and vestiture aside for her, counting myself rich to be a poor lance again, if one sweet presence nerved me, and twice graced if that I was banned for a time by her approval?"

While he muttered thus to himself, standing ardent yet irresolute by the tapestries, another person came upon the scene. Margaret Walsingham had been sitting out an hour under the stars, and now, not knowing any one was in the chamber, came slowly round the battlements out of the starlit darkness into the shine of the open casement. But there she halted, suddenly catching sight of Oswald, and the hasty first words of her welcome died on her lips, for she heard he was speaking. She lifted instinctively from off her ears the light wrap wound about her head, and, wondering and mute, listened for a moment to those wild words of love—listened with a heightening colour to the outpourings of a passion, every word of which seemed directed to *her*. Could she believe it; was it possible? She glanced round the great grey hall; it was absolutely empty. No, there was then one else to whom he could be addressing himself; no, for certain he had come there to see her, and, being quite alone as he fancied, was thus in-

cautious. In that moment of the unexpected and unwelcome, she scarcely knew whether she were more frightened or astonished. With the true egotism of love, which fondly supposes that the world centres round the one object of its adoration, and that the hopes and passions of all others are for the moment in willing abeyance, Oswald's old love had been to her a dead flame, a light fancy which she thought he must perforce agree in holding as a pretty set piece before the curtain rose upon the strong bright drama of this real new love of hers,—a thing to be laughed at as lightly as summer dreams six months old,—and here he was, fashioning that trouble-fraught love in secret, as she thought; vivifying it with the true language of passion which lies beneath its spoken words; wooing one who could be none other than herself with a strength and fervour there was no blinking—and her hand tightened on her shawl, and her woman-blood ran hot and abashed even into her finger-tips.

Quick again, before the first sensation of dismay had subsided, came another thought. If Oswald de Montaigne felt this and thus, it doubled all those dangers of Margaret's lonely state which had frightened her upon her first waking that morning after her arrival. She had not time to think of it all clearly, but she gave a gasp of fortuitive terror, and glanced despairingly out into the darkness where, far away, that other lover fought, and the great dull

boss of the town was beset all round with the faint ring of hostile camp fires; then back into the chamber, so like a sumptuous prison, where he who, it flashed upon her, was her too willing gaoler stalked here and there with the deep undisciplined love of his nature working in his face, and instinctively she shrank back a pace into the shadow, just as Oswald turned in his walk.

It was not so quick a motion as to escape Oswald the watchful soldier's eye. He saw the flutter of the white gown, and, striding forward, was confronted by his cousin! Of all women, in the first angry surprise of that meeting, he thought she was surely the one he would least willingly have met. And then again he thought, for necessity brightens even slow minds, that here was a chance of which a ready man might make golden opportunity. Margaret had probably heard those wild words of love. It was almost certain she did not know their true object, but in all likelihood and reason would appropriate them to herself. Here, then, was a splendid chance; it rushed suddenly upon him to make advantage out of mishap, and, by redirecting the current of his passion, gain a step towards the winning of this sweet intrusive kinswoman, who must be wooed somehow, even though she were discarded as soon as won for a truer love. He turned to Margaret with that idea in his mind, extending his hands as he did so, yet hesitated at the very point

where to be plausible he should be prompt, for somehow the felicity forsook him at the test. He could not bring his rough, unaccustomed soldier tongue all on a minute to those smooth lies. He saw the golden chance, and would have grasped it, but his tongue hung heavy and sullen in his mouth. He glanced angrily behind as though he hoped Saluzzio's prompting presence might be there, and, failing that, stepped back a space, and dropped his head, and would not look at Margaret.

In that very weakness he furthered the deception, perchance, better than he could have done by speaking. What could have been more lover-like, what truer to the surprised wooer whose forbidden passion has been overheard by its object, than that voiceless apology, that confused and silent contrition of extended hands and averted face? Startled and grieved, yet Margaret's woman heart was touched. She did not for a moment any longer doubt but that Oswald loved her still, and, bitter and dangerous as the fact might prove, it was nevertheless incense of a kind no gentle heart is quite proof against, and she had, moreover, once loved him also.

Light as thistledown came her touch upon his arm in a moment, and very tenderly and sorrowfully she called him by his name. "Oswald," she said, "dear cousin Oswald! forgive me for my light step and thoughtlessness. Indeed it was naught but chance. I had gone round under the screen of the walls to sit

an hour in the soft evening air, and think those sad thoughts that come in the stillness, and so presently came back, and saw and heard you—heard you say—for 'tis idle to hide it—what I would not have heard for half my heritance." She paused a minute, as though to summon resolution, and then, with an effort, continued: "I am sorry beyond description, Oswald, if those wild words I heard sprang truly from your heart, and my luckless coming to Rhodes has wakened in you memories I hoped long dead and forgotten. Perhaps I have been myself remiss—I have little knowledge of these things, and no one to ask, but indeed, and indeed, that which grieves you grieves me no less," said the fair girl, turning up to his those eyes in which the white tears were shining like diamonds. "Oswald, you know it does not rest with me; my faith is plighted, and may not be broke, oh, be wise and generous for us both! Take back those words that hurt me even to think of. Put your big heart into the noble work about us. Ay, trust me, dear cousin, there are better things to die for than one white-cheeked woman even though she holds Hemsworth and Gillingham, Raithby and Kilverstone. Be wise, be generous—forget!" And then sinking her voice lower, the girl said, "And when all Europe honours De Montaigne's name, when princes court him, and strong kings praise, to no one will his fame be dearer than Margaret Walsingham, and no friendly doors ever open wider to him than those of which she is mistress."

It was a fair bid for peace, but an evil spirit prompted Oswald to answer sullenly, "Faith once broke, Lady Walsingham, may well be broken twice; he who now holds your plight holds a perjured bond."

"Oh harsh and unjust!" exclaimed the lady; "such bond as there ever was between you and me lapsed by your long silence and indifference."

"Indifference, Margaret!" the hospitaller said, scarcely knowing whether it were true or false he spoke, but following the instinct of the moment towards the goal to which his necessities urged him —"indifference! I swear by all I hold sacred I have kept our plight in mind all through these long years that intervened between the making and fulfilment—neglecting it, if so I did, only out of very certainty. And 'silence,' say you?—a soldier's busy life gives little time for penmanship. 'Silence!' forsooth, lady, it was the silence of one who trusted fully in another, and did not need to ask each hour whether that other's affection shifted here and there upon the wind. 'Twas a silence, since so you call it, which this very month I thought to break, counting it dishonour to your worth to doubt you kept our compact still inviolate, even as I did——"

"And your livery?" said Margaret, bitterly,—"your vows of abnegation and solitude? Was it for me you joined this monkish brotherhood, and half swore, in putting your novice hand to their stern rules, 'never to look upon a woman's face again'—ay,

you see, I know the scroll—'never to touch a woman's hand even though it were but your mother's'?"

Oswald winced a little at that shrewd questioning, but answered lightly, "The bee, fair cousin, dons the dusty yellow livery of each pillaged flower in turn; it recks him little what hue his coat is so long as he draws the honey. I came to Rhodes, lady, thinking, in truth, it might vantage my fame in many ways, but never meaning to be long bound by the vows of its brotherhood, unless it greatly suited me."

"An easy sentiment, cousin Oswald, that might apply to more things than one! And so you strive to hold me to a shadowy early troth, given when my unripe affections knew no promptings but my father's wish,—you, who would put off at convenience vows taken on sufferance by the altar steps? Oswald, I cannot think it. This is some wretched fancy that will fade with to-morrow. See! here, friendless and alone, I, your old playmate, Margaret Walsingham, crave you, with heart and lip, in the very name of that love so danger-fraught you say you bear for me, to be generous and forget. Do this for me, Oswald,—and it cannot be as difficult as it may seem,—put your hand in mine, and say, 'Coz, 'tis as you wish,' and, in place of that poor threadbare passion which hangs like a veil between our friendship, a new affection shall arise between us which shall last as long as life itself."

"And supposing, Margaret," said De Montaigne,

sullenly, "that I held the substance better than the shadow, the fulfilment better than the promise, and would not barter my ancient rights for a dim vision of to-morrow?"

"In brief, supposing that you held me to a vow that was no vow, and were obstinate past all courtesy and reason?"

"Ah, Lady Walsingham, supposing that were so?"

"Why then," said Margaret, struggling with the strong emotions that rose within her,—"why then Oswald de Montaigne were poor knight indeed, but little better than a ruffianly sea pirate who, having trapped a helpless maid, holds her to egregious ransom. And if, indeed, De Montaigne stands neither by courtesy nor reason, neither will Margaret Walsingham, but tells him frankly, as frankly as he does himself unmask his own presumption, that she despises and scorns that suit he proffers so ungraciously, holding herself, as lady paramount and sole, free as wind to give or take her troth, and caring nothing whether or no kinsman give a liberty she did but ask for out of courtesy." And the girl, now wrathful in turn, with eyes flashing and hands tight set upon her shawl, drew herself up, and, stepping back a pace, stared proudly at him.

As for the soldier, desperate and perplexed, despising the part he played, and uncertain of his own mind for two minutes at a time, Margaret's cold disdain wounded him deeply. She had so little to lose

by bending to his will, he argued, and he so much to lose by losing her, it was monstrous she should resist and flout him. It was not, he scowled, as though he meant to be a hard taskmaster. Once married, and freed by her wealth from those debts which hung like a millstone round his neck, he meant, he wished, to leave her free. Gods! he would give her such freedom as no other maiden matron looked for: he would sign a deed of separation on the very marriage altar, if she willed, and care not a jot what English churls hung round about her afterwards so that he himself were free in turn. But submit she must; and yet there was the beautiful termagant scowling at him like a marble goddess from the shadows with not a trace of submission in her countenance. In a burst of wrath and anger he seized her fiercely by the wrist, until she felt those iron fingers of his burning into her tender flesh.

"Margaret!" he cried, "fool and reckless, will you drive me to madness by your petty logic? Can you not see my mood is made desperate by your sullenness? Can you not guess my will laughs at your obstinacy? Do you think that, having you here, I let you go again till you be amenable? And yet," he said, as compunction got the upper hand in his mind once more, "forgive me, Margaret, for my roughness. Indeed I had much rather win this cause by gentleness, but you must not think it is one to be dismissed by a haughty frown or two. Look at these strong walls and your loneliness! Look what all men must say

who, knowing what friends we were, should also know how you came straight hither, and have lodged with me. Look at my great temptations and how chance favours them with golden opportunities, and save me from seeking that by force (though Heaven itself seems to smile upon it) which you may so well concede in willingness."

As they stood there in the cool evening air the pale eastern planets swung out of the sea one by one and went clambering into the clear sweep of the sky overhead. It was so peaceful and pleasant that Margaret could scarcely believe the town was shut in by fierce and bloodthirsty foes. The cannonading, which, as has been said, was hot all the afternoon, had dropped away at sundown, and came with longer and longer gaps between the echoes, until now it had ceased altogether. The frogs were croaking in the runnel that ran down by the chapel of St. Anthony; the loons were calling out at sea beyond the crescent lights of the Turkish fleet: and for a time there was no other sound. But presently Lady Walsingham, whose angry, averted face was towards the south, saw a light gleam on the ramparts beyond the Jewish quarter. For a moment she thought it was but a chance torch carried by the soldiers as they changed their guard, and then another light lit. "Look, Count Oswald!" she cried; "surely something happens there." Then another and another, and now there were six, then twenty, and, anon,

thirty flambeaux blazing; and in one more minute their shine was all blended into a long yellow gleam, that lay golden against the ebony hills behind, growing brighter and brighter every second as the canopy of smoke broadened overhead, and each detail of the gardens and houses about it rose up clear and visible. The hospitaller saw the shine, as he stood with his back to the glare, in eyes whereinto he was looking in vain for a softer light, and turned swiftly round and stared. As he looked hard into the southern night, a confused noise went up into the air—a tangled uproar of steel on steel, of shouting and screaming, with half-heard cries of "Allah! Allah!" in it, and answering shouts of "St. John! St. John!" And to and fro the yellow gleams swayed, and the smoke mounted, and the wild red glitter of arms ran rippling up and down the wall like the luminous flash of the waves tumbling at night on an unseen beach. Louder and louder came the uproar, and Margaret could distinctly hear the shrill screams of the Moslems following their green banners to the breach, and the shouting of the defenders. "Oswald!" she cried, very willing to forget the episode of the last few minutes in this new danger, "what does it mean? who fights there? Oh, will you not go to help them?"

"It means, fair cousin," said the other, with half-hidden eagerness, "that our good friend, Andrew Hepburn, and his English have all the luck to-night,

and are bearing the brunt of the first attack upon the walls."

"What! Is it the bastion of England that they storm, and Hepburn there!" And Oswald felt, with a jealous pang, poor Margaret's fingers tighten convulsively upon his wrist. "Cousin!" she cried, with a new pain in her heart, "how many men has he with him? Are they enough? Look! look! how the fight roars and swings!"

"Enough, lady," said De Montaigne, somewhat more coldly, "to show how much can be done by a few—honour is the more when there be not many to divide it."

"And you cannot go to him?"

"Alas, not without leave; 'tis the hardest part of a soldier's duty to idly watch such glorious strife, yet each man must keep his place or Rhodes were not worth an hour's purchase."

"Why then here comes, I think, the leave you wish for," said Margaret, excitedly.

And up the long sea-girt mole, connecting the fortress of St. Nicholas with the town, came galloping a mounted messenger. He dragged his horse back on his haunches at the portal, and leaping down rushed within. In another minute he was by them, cap in hand.

"Lord Oswald de Montaigne," he said, "this from D'Aubusson. He bids you follow him, with a score of men, as hard as ever you can go, to succour

St. John's gate, where the English, under Hepburn of Thursby, stand against a hundred times their number."

"Gleefully indeed," answered the hospitaller, snatching up his sword. And while Margaret, with fingers that trembled in spite of herself, buckled the broad belt, and gave him the great cloak and steel gloves he had thrown down an hour ago, he continued, "Never was message more welcome! Yet how is it, Hindley, that the Master sends to me for a rescue when Hepburn has strong neighbours on the walls eager and willing enough to help him?"

"Your seaward ward, Lord Oswald, is the only one unthreatened. D'Aubusson durst not move a man from elsewhere. All night the Turks have shifted to and fro along our front: their camp lights flit like Jack-o'-lanterns through the olive gardens; their ammunition tumbrils stream here and there in endless files; the ruined shrines and gardens along our face swarm with roving bands. No man can say where or how the next blow will fall, save that it falls not to-night upon St. Nicholas."

"Enough! It is a happy uncertainty which brings me to the front! Thanks, coz, a thousand thanks; fear nothing—forgive—all will be well. To bed, you and sweet Samana; and to-morrow we meet again." And hastily waving his hand, Oswald de Montaigne and the messenger sped forth down the winding stairs.

In the yard below a score of yeomen were already mounted, and a dark figure by the steps was holding Oswald's horse. He vaulted into the saddle straight from the cobble stones, and, as he bent down to put his foot into the stirrup, the man who gave it him half turned back his hood, and, with a start of surprise, Oswald found himself face to face in the dim lantern-light with Saluzzio.

"No such great hurry, dear comrade," whispered the Greek, grinning as he noted the displeasure on the other's face,—"no hurry, I say. Stoop down a little lower while I give you the reins." And as the Count did as he was bidden, Saluzzio continued in his ear, "Remember who you go to rescue, and ride not too fast. 'Tis a good chance of being rid of our young cockerel early in the game. Oh, you know well enough what I mean! And in case Hepburn takes no hurt from the Turkish scimitars in front, why, there is a bosom friend of mine, secret and sagacious, in his company, who is to follow him closely, and, if he gets the chance, make things easy for us with a thrust between the shoulders."

"You mean," whispered Oswald through his teeth, —"you mean you have bribed a traitorous villain to follow Hepburn in the *mêlée*, and, if occasion serves, to stab him unawares."

"Yes, then, since you like it put so plainly."

De Montaigne struck his hand upon his breast, and, groaning, gave the reins a shake, and away he

went with his company galloping down the harbour; while Saluzzio watched them for a minute, and then, with a shrug of his shoulder, drew his cape over his head, and, giving one quick glance of longing back to the turrets where his daughter slept, walked away to the town.

In the upper rooms of the keep Margaret had heard those retreating hoofs, and was striving to pacify the frightened Samana, who had come from her room at the sound of loud voices and was now gazing horror-struck at the pantomime of battle outside. Nothing Lady Walsingham could do or say would nerve her to that sight. She fled into the turret-chamber, and, seizing a loose shawl, wrapped it about her ears to deaden the shouting, and, throwing herself upon a couch, gave way again to pitiful headlong fear.

And up and down by the battlement arch stalked the English girl, in full view of the glow under which her lover fought against desperate odds, her shapely head held high, her hands tight clasped behind her back, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright, the yellow glow of the blazing fires by which Turk and Nazarene were finding the way to each other's throats making her fair hair shine like the ruddy mane of a young lioness. And like a young lioness striding up and down a cage all too small for her spirit, that lady paused again and again by the window, snuffing the breath of the battle, and listening with bright eyes

and lips tight pressed together to the din and the shouting.

"Oh, it is terrible, terrible, lady!" wept Samana, from her silken hiding-place. "Would that I were the smallest mouse that I might creep into a dusty cranny!" sobbed that nut-brown maid.

"And would I were a man, if only for an hour!" cried Lady Walsingham. "Oh, I would pawn all Hemsworth and Gillingham for a good horse and a strong brand and one splendid effort—asking for no more lands than I could cover under the white sweep of that bright steel, and no better chair of state than my charger's rocking selle! See! see!" she cried, seizing the reluctant Greek by the wrist, and obliging her to look out for a moment; "see how the noble game swings and roars. There! there! that red flush in the sky was molten lead spilled on the heads of the escaladers. St. Mary! I saw it poured myself at Acre—saw a ladderful of strong men blasted by it like grass by the lightning. And yon's Greek fire that the Turks toss upon the crowded battlement."

"And the lights, lady, the shooting stars that rise in coveys from the Cyprus groves, and drop baleful and smoking in the town?"

"Fire arrows, Samana, for our thatch. God save us if the townsmen be not prompt with them."

"Oh, horrible and dreadful! I look no more. Oh, if the Christian knights should fail!"

"Fail!" cried the other bitterly, letting Samana hide herself again,—"fail! Why then Christian blood would swill ankle-deep down yonder streets, and I and you would know our price in good piastres, and the nice manners of some Turkish ruffians, ere an hour was over."

So she raved and stalked in tearless impatience up and down the room, crying out on the feebleness of her sex, who was herself nerving two strong men to splendid effort; and anon she would pause in that caged-lion walk of hers by her companion's couch, and, looking down cold and inflexible for a minute, studied, as though they were some strange phenomenon, the tears that flowed down the face of the Rhodian girl and the quivers which shook her fine small person every time the shouting swelled upon the air. "Happy tears," she laughed disdainfully, "that can let out grief at flood-tide! Cry on, Samana! cry for me too—in truth I need such service." And then away she went to the parapet again, and stood facing the flare in the south with all her soul sitting in her eyes.

For near an hour that battle aurora lit the southern ramparts, and then Margaret's sharp ears caught a change in the ebb and flow of the clamour; there was a pause for a minute, as though men gathered themselves for a final effort, followed by a wild pagan yell that echoed through the cypress gardens as though a thousand wolves were hunting there,

a struggling, answering shout from Christian throats, a breathless pause, during which Margaret's heated fancy almost made her think she could hear the hard breathing of strong men in deadly grapple rising and falling on the night wind—a pause of the intensest expectation during which not a cock crowed or a foot fell in Rhodes,—and then, a ringing, spontaneous English cheer burst into the black sky; another and another followed, the hurrying figures collected into little motionless groups, the lights flickered and went out, and the glow faded into darkness as suddenly as it had arisen, and night settled down again silent and dim.

"It is over," said Lady Walsingham, in her calmest voice, coming in from the battlements and lifting Samana's coverlet by a silken corner; "—we have won!"

"Praise to Heaven, dear lady, for it!" responded the Greek. "Oh, how brave you have been not to weep all through, who had so much at stake." And rising, she dropped her shawls about her, then started and stared, for Margaret had taken a crescent chair to the casement, and was sitting on it with her back to the light, and her face buried in her hands. In a moment Samana was by her, gazing down in loving perplexity for proud Lady Walsingham, the stately and reserved, had yielded in turn to her nature, and, as the young girl's light hand was placed tenderly on her shoulder, the Saxon maiden's pent-up

anxiety was dissolved into a splendid, reckless, outburst of tears, a gushing, queenly tempest of white grief and heroic emotion, the like of which that Eastern damsel had never seen before.

CHAPTER V.

Day after day the siege progressed, and hour after hour Margaret Walsingham had to bear the keen monotony of perpetual suspense. The mere physical danger from the rain of shot, shared in common with the rest of the garrison, sank into insignificance beside the perils which beset her should either the town fall or her lover, Andrew Hepburn, die. As for the bodily danger, the great round shot from the Turkish mortars sang all day out of the ruined gardens on the slopes, and the stone and masonry of the strong walls behind which she sheltered splintered, clattered, and cracked under those mighty impacts. Once she had come in to the terror-stricken Samana dusty from head to foot, her brown hair full of rubble and sand, and had laughingly bid the wondering Greek to free her of the stuff, telling, as she did so, how a granite shot as big as a full moon had passed within an arm's length of her, and plunged screeching along the turret face, burying her and the psalter she was reading in its smother. Another day she had gone out upon the lower tiers to bind

a strip of linen upon a wounded English trooper's arm, and as she stood exposed for a moment, face to face with the strong soldier, tenderly wrapping the white stuff round his hurt, and asking him (to take his mind from off the pain) where lived that pleasant wife and those sunny-haired little ones he had once told her of, there came a grey something humming out of the din and smoke in the south, something grey and huge and horrible, that threw its shadow on them, and with a scream Margaret had felt its cold breath on her face—had started back from the hurtling iron terror—and looked—and stared again, and staggered away faint and sick; for the lint hung loose and bloody in her fingers, and not a trace, not a sign, of that strong yeoman was left upon the battlements!

The mere material terror and danger of long monotonous days, marked only by such incidents as these, had grown dull by familiarity; but the finer terrors of fancy were ever fresh. Lady Walsingham's love for Andrew Hepburn had grown, as it will with women, in absence; and while her English heart bounded with pleasure as each rumour came to her of the great fights which were fought daily on the walls, and the gallant part her soldier had taken in them, yet this constant separation from him alone was a sorrow, while a full knowledge of the danger in which he stood made a purgatory of patience itself. If he fell—and every time the cannons on

Elia opened their white mouths, or the Moslem yell swelled upon the air, her heart stood still—if he fell, though the city came off victorious, could she think for a moment her imperious cousin would let such a prize as herself again pass away from his clutch without a struggle? Friendless in an age when to be friendless was to be the victim of the first bold thief who chose to set a hand upon the prize, could she hope, save by some happy chance, to leave Rhodes in safety and honour, and shake off that dread kinsman of hers and his black satellite? And if the town were stormed! Hour by hour through those long weeks it was an everpresent danger which any moment of night or day might ripen into fact. She shuddered to think what then. For two days and nights after the city's fall the Moslem swore hell was to reign within the Rhodian walls. They had sworn by every hair of Mahomet's beard they would flush the kennels with red Christian blood, and dice for the Christian maidens on the high altar-table in St. John's own sacred shrine. And white Margaret Walsingham bit her lip and felt her heart sink as she looked day by day from her watch-tower back to where the Turkish hosts surged, like a black sea, thicker and thicker against the crumbling ramparts of the town, and seemed to her fearful eyes each hour to loom nearer and nearer, dreadful and more dreadful.

Down under those ramparts she knew the horrible

game of war was being played out with a matchless hatred of race and faith that left no thought of mercy on either side. She had seen Christian prisoners, nailed to planks, sent floating off from the Turkish ships into the lonely glare of the Ægean, and spies hurled from the opposite cliffs, and men, maimed and tortured out of all humanity, struggle back into the town. And, as though to show what the Frankish women too might look for, a soldier's wife told her one day how three girls of Istrios had tried, under cover of night, to pass through the Moslem lines, but were discovered and taken prisoners. Paleologus gave them to the soldiers, and, after a time, those wretched women were brought down stark naked to within a bowshot of St. John's gate, and there crucified on tall crosses, with their faces towards the city. It was a dreadful story, and Margaret scarcely found heart to ask, "What did the knights? Surely they could not watch them suffer. It takes so long to die that way."

"No, lady," said the woman, in a fierce whisper, "they did not suffer long. I may not say who counselled it, though all Rhodes knows, but English archers have kind hearts and strong arms, and their arrows are an ell or more in length; and afterwards, when they were all dead——"

"What happened then?" said Margaret, for she saw there was more to come; and the woman answered with a savage twinkle in her eye—she

was but a soldier's wife, and the times were rough—

"Nothing so much, madam; but Rugenwalde, of Lautenburg, who held ward there, soon came down —a very gentle and courteous knight in general, I am told,—and when he saw those naked women shining in the sun, with the arrows in their bosoms, and heard their story from the shamefaced soldiery, he fell into a furious passion, and ordered out all the Turkish prisoners that he had. There were thirty, madam, and the Landgrave smote their heads off one by one upon a flesher's block, took out the shot from thirty cannon, and ramming those grisly trophies down, fired them — it was just luncheon time—into the Turkish camp." And then she added with a sigh, "And so the fight goes on, and may the dear Lord in His mercy have compassion on those who lose it at the last!"

While such dreadful stories circulated in the town, and nerved even the basest to desperate resistance, the assault on the walls went on without a pause. Night and day the Turkish cannons, the biggest of their kind then known, sent down from the arsenals of the Bosphorus to subdue the Christian stronghold, rained huge masses of stone and iron into the town. Her towers and pinnacles crumbled under that storm like things of sand. The ramparts smoked and fell whole bastions at a time as the Turkish artillery turned upon them; and whenever they went thunder-

ing into the outer moat, and the shrieking Moslem leapt to the open breach, the great gap was filled with crowding Christians, and in the night that followed a thousand willing hands made good the havoc of the day.

With reckless valour the knights drove back hour after hour every assault of an enemy ten times more numerous than themselves, and strange tales of another sort began to be passed amongst the townsmen. It was soon whispered that they did not fight unaided. The Blessed Virgin in the great stained-glass window of the chapel had, it was said, extended her hand in benediction over the heads of some who came to pray for victory; and D'Aubusson, ever ready witted, when he heard of it, had ridden in princely state, with five hundred knights behind him and the great banner of the brotherhood borne before, down to the shrine, to do homage.

Another day another story ran. In the first pink twilight, when a sudden onset had driven the weary Nazarenes from a new breach as the wind of September drives the yellow chaff from the threshing floors in Kornah, and the Moslem hordes came pouring into the gap like Euphrates between its banks in the spring time, and the fate of the city hung on a moment,—then, as the struggling knights went back and back in the twilight, and the glittering helmets of the sons of Kojaili and Kastamun came glinting over the Christian walls in the flush

of the low sunlight, no Rhodian woman's honour seemed for the moment worth a silver bangle, and no soldier's head worth its tax-penny,—then, just at that moment, it was told afterwards, when those who held the breach were fighting madly against the living torrent, they looked up, and there—gods! it was a sight to fire their blood—there, on the highest coping of the rampart, standing sedate and sorrowful over the fight, limned clear in the pure shine of the morning against the black curtain of night hanging over the Moslem camp, all in his rough shepherd cloak, leaning on his shepherd crook, his feet bare, his humble water-bottle still at his side, stood holy St. John himself! There was a presence to draw courage from! there were eyes to fight beneath! The brothers and those who came rushing to their help saw the sight, and a mad frenzy nerved their arms. The Moslem saw it too, and scimitar and yataghan turned heavy as lead in their hands, their knees unlocked, their hearts were water, and back went the victorious torrent, streaming back by the feet of that pale splendid Thing of the great sad eyes and saintly face,—back howling and shouting through the choked and bloody passage in the masonry. And when the dust-clouds lifted on the brightening morning sky the city was saved, and as Frank and Arab parted, they looked back and saw for one minute the Divine Shepherd lift His hand as one who counts His sheep again in anemonèd fields of Kishon, and

then He was gone like any other strand of mist which the sun was drinking from the sleepy sea.

So, day after day, backwards and forwards swung the fight. All the cunning treacheries of Eastern warfare were tried in turn by the besiegers, and every plot foiled and every effort repulsed by the ceaseless vigilance of the inflexible soldier-priest who held command over the town. Margaret had seen German spearmen, in yellow and brown liveries, charge through the square below the grand master's palace and scatter a riotous band of renegades who came to counsel that Rhodes should be thrown upon the Turkish mercy; she had seen another crowd run laughing and cheering through the wide market-place to see poor Maitre George hanged—the wittiest, handsomest rogue, that ever played turncoat once too often. And day by day, under her eyes, turrets and pinnacles had crumbled and toppled over, until the town was as shorn of ornament as a wheat-field in harvest, and the pale scum left by ploughing shot and falling ruins lay all along inside the harbour in a deep white crescent.

Fierce as was the cannonade and fighting all round the doomed city, nowhere did the dust rise thicker from tumbling walls, or battlements tremble and sink more often than round the broad front of St. Nicholas. Standing at the harbour mouth it was the key of the town, and when repeated attacks on the latter had been repelled as often by the valour

of the knights, the Turks turned all their energies upon it. They established their batteries in the flat graveyard, on the extreme right, under the ruined porch of St. Anthony; and when D'Aubusson enfiladed them there by a gun placed in the garden of Auvergne, under the north wall, sending his round shot tearing through Christian tomb and Moslem tent alike, they fell back a few score yards, and renewed the firing from the sloping terraces above.

Three hundred round shot hit St. Nicholas in six days, it was computed. All the dainty carvings and pretty embellishments of that lordly keep were gone at the end of that week of fire; three of its towers had fallen, and all the facing stone was peeled from one side by that withering iron storm. The blue tubs of Rhodian ware and their golden flowered cactuses upon the battlement were knocked into a thousand pieces; the green copper spouting over Margaret's oriel had been hit by a missile and was twisted into a wondrous spiral; the grey walls, six feet thick, which no earthly shot could pierce, were all starred and dinted with the bombard balls; the alcove doors in Margaret's room creaked and rattled, china fell, arms clattered night and day as the great bolts, one by one, came humming up out of the distance and struck with blows like the blows of a giant fist upon the outer walls all through those dreadful hours.

Amongst the din and dust, when the sky above

was clouded by day with a grey pale sulphurous smoke, which still hung there at night gleaming copper red like a great angry dome from edge to edge every time the red cannon lights shone on Elia, when no man durst make a supper promise at sunrise, and no woman looked southward through the war veil without a pang in her secret heart,—under such circumstances the great peril outside might well have occupied all minds.

For a long time, indeed, De Montaigne was too busy in strengthening the tower defences to press his cause with Margaret; and she, full of a hundred fears, hid in her chamber and would not be seen. During those first weeks Isaac Saluzzio, too, scowled and cowered in strange hiding-places, bewailing himself of unrecovered debts every time he saw a knightly creditor carried, grim and bloody, by him on his bier; cursing Rhodes, and usury, and Moslems, all in one breath, and not least himself, for putting Samana in the pink of danger, while lastly, of those who interest us most, that girl herself, numbed with terror, wrung her hands day by day and shook her white arms back towards the town where that dear loved father lived, and would have gone to him a hundred times over but for the shot-swept causeway she must needs pass under the eyes of the Turkish gunners, and for one other reason to which De Montaigne was not stranger—perhaps it was even the better reason of the two.

But few things are more wonderful than the adaptability of men to circumstance. In a very few days terror itself had palled upon the Rhodians' jaded fancy, and old thoughts came thronging back, while life fell into its grooves again as though smoke, and shot, and blood, and dead men asprawl in every street, and houses toppling into their foundations, were but a normal world. Saluzzio, that villain, crept from his lairs, and began to plot again towards the great scheme centring in Margaret Walsingham which he felt must end one way or another with the ending of the siege. Once or twice he saw his daughter, and on those rare occasions it seemed to him he had never known how sweet she was until chance had for the moment parted them. During these few minutes of affection he never failed to bid her be prudent, to keep under cover of what were in truth the strongest walls in the town; and, above everything, to stay close to Margaret's side and speak with no man; and, most of all, he warned her against the custodian of the tower himself, Oswald de Montaigne. Thus each time he would take heart of grace, leaving Samana in her dangerous lodging, and not noting or understanding how or why she hung her head and reddened between fear and a secret pleasure whenever Oswald's name was mentioned.

And that soldier himself, long accustomed to war, found leisure presently to suffer to the full the strange

difficulties of his position. He, too, like Saluzzio, saw the desperate game they played must be lost or won under cover of the smoke and confusion of the siege; the moment it was raised, and some of those Christian princes of whom they had begged help might arrive at any moment and effectually rout the Turks,—then, when that happened, it was certain Hepburn would claim his bride, and Isaac claim his pound of flesh, and hell yawn again wider than ever at Oswald's feet. A hundred times in those red days his better nature struggled with his baser, and wild visions rose before him of confession or retraction, and, perhaps, of borrowing a great sum from Margaret wherewith to shake off the talons of the Greek vulture who had him in his grip. But as often his pride blanched at the thought; the very words stuck in his throat. No, he thought after those futile efforts, Hepburn must die as many a better man was dying for half the reason, and Margaret must bend. By St. Mary! 'twas no hard thing he asked her. She should be free as air thereafter, provided only that she paid his debts; 'twas inconceivable she could not see the convenience of it, or could prefer that heavy English boor of hers to such privilege as he, De Montaigne, would give her, under the all-covering protection of a name which, new gilded and rehabilitated by her wealth, would stand high amongst the proudest in Christendom. As for Samana, the shame and perplexity vanished from

that soldier's face as her gentle name rose to his lips. The proud white English lady—he laughed to himself—might queen it as she liked over her rank meadow lands and great swine-filled woods, playing dark-browed tyrant to ale-sodden English churls as she choose, but that cold shrine was not for Oswald's knees: he would give the proud lady paramount fair return for what she gave in half of his name and reputation, asking no surly questions of her as she should ask none of him; and then, with Samana, ensconced somewhere where the sun shines and the myrtle thickets flower and jealousies were not, he would taste once more, he said, of happiness and ease. And arguing so, the deluded soldier turned again with a lighter heart from the sullen truce which marked his meetings with the English heiress, and gat him away to a pleasanter companionship.

Down by the extreme point of the peninsula at the head of which stood the keep of St. Nicholas was a lesser tower. This was connected by an old wooden bridge with the main hold, and had been used before the siege began as a look-out, whence a crescent light was sometimes burned at night to guide ships into the harbour. But, owing to its smaller size and lighter make, the Turkish gunners, when the storm began, had very quickly rendered it untenable. It had been deserted after five days' battering, and now stood there a fantastic ruin, in

all the solitude of its new desolation, neglected alike by friends and foes, full of deep embrasures half torn away, and curious seats whence one might get peeps of the stately capital of ancient commerce in the death grapple with her enemies, or sit on an over-turned buttress with feet adangle in the emerald blue waters of the bay, feeding the happy little fishes who thronged the place, green and blue and grey and golden, with date bread and millet seed, while the great shot, on their deadly errands, whistled like a December gale through the bare corridors above or tore milk-white furrows down the waters.

Thither Oswald would go, and from that vantage-point whistle three times, like a kestrel who calls its mate, and wait. It was not often very long; and presently, over the shot-riddled timbers of the bridge, and down the jagged steps of the ruined turret, and through the rubble and fallen blocks of masonry, a girlish form would steal, slipping from shadow to shadow, and, tripping down the narrow paths between the heaps, with many a fearful look behind to note if unkindly eyes were watching, come to where Oswald stood; and, panting and rosy with exertion, Samana—for that it was she need not be said—would yield herself into the strong arms of her accepted lover, and, with the old maidenness given place to a shy confidence, would wrap herself in his cloak and let her heart throb in time and touch with his, while the hot bright sun beat down upon them

out of the Mediterranean sky, and all that little world round about of carnage and ruin seemed to those two for some fleeting moments a very paradise.

It was a strange wooing-place, but that mattered nothing to them. The green grass all about was already healing the raw wounds of the ruined tower; great convolvuli of a hundred arms with their roots deep in some clefts between the ancient masonry were escalading the ruins afresh—it was midsummer time—sending their green vedettes far out on every side, till grey crag and toppled masonry glowed with a pink and golden tapestry of flowers. And so still those two would sit, fingers locked in fingers, and head and head together, that the little saffron-coloured finches, building in the wall above, fluttered fearlessly about and made no stop in their daily task of lining that nest of theirs, over which their small hearts yearned in boundless joy, with grey tufts of dead men's hair. And nearer still an ebony and chestnut shrike would come, and stare hard at him and her,—then, gone for a minute after a crimson and yellow butterfly, would bring it back, and with many flirts of tail would perch, mayhap, upon a spent shot, and pull the bright quivering wings one by one from out their sockets, and hammer the victim dead upon the Turkish bomb; and then, with a merry twinkle in those gay, black eyes, would seem to say, "Oswald, comrade, 'tis a small difference that separates us two!" would gulp the struggling

quarry down, and flit gaily off again for a fresher prey.

Hour by hour those two would sit like that; closer and closer De Montaigne, deeper in love than he had ever been before, whispered in the ear of Saluzzio's daughter, while the time slipped by and the roar of the big guns rose and fell behind the city, pressing a love that asked for more and more at each new concession on the fair frail girl whose will bent under before his like a reed before the wind. Oswald knew in his heart that he was undoing at one moment all he did for his fortunes at another, yet he could not stop; and Samana knew also that that delightful time could not last, wrapping herself in the dear delight of the moment, and not daring to look ahead till, to her soft Eastern mind, it seemed her very soul was melting into a golden haze of love, and all her individuality was being drained into the greater individuality of the other.

Thus day after day slipped by, until the middle of June had come, and the fiercest attack of any the town had yet withstood was at hand. It fell in the grey light of the early morning of the 20th of that month, and for many hours the fate of Rhodes, and every man and woman within her walls, hung in the balance.

CHAPTER VI.

For nearly a month the tower of St. Nicholas had stood against the worst the Turkish gunners could do; but during the few days preceding the great assault, it had seemed the strong walls were giving way at last, while a dangerous slope of rubbish and masonry, by the help of which a successful assault seemed only too possible, had grown round its base.

De Montaigne was not so deep in love but that he had a keen eye to the safety of his post, and, warned in time of the danger at hand, every evening at dusk he and each man and slave that could be spared from the watch kept upon the walls elsewhere had toiled to make that grey glacis, rising from the sea almost halfway up the tower, into a new source of strength to the defenders. With a thousand men working hour after hour in the moonlight, he had built out of the ruins a stone wall, breast high, round the head of the mole; and inside this again a ditch, and then a palisade of sharp-pointed stakes sloping outward, with but one narrow passage through them. It was a strange sight, night after night, to see that busy

throng of men, swarming like ants about the foot of the rugged tower, all working for one common purpose in grim silence,—gentle and simple, knight and serf, freeman and slave, the dusty lords of broad signaries, toiling side by side with their humblest vassals; Jew and Gentile, Florentine and Latin, Saxon and Greek, heaving at spade and mattock, bag and basket, all dumb and confused in the darkness. They were only just in time: the very night before the attack came, the double circle was completed; the shallow water under the tower walls guarded by heavily nailed planks, sunk there to prevent an enemy from wading across under their cover; the fire-ships drawn up ready under the mole; the Greek fire and the chaldrons of pitch and lead for the heads of the escaladers, and all done that experience or ingenuity could suggest.

It was a hot, heavy night, that 19th of June, 1480. The half-moon swung out big and crimson over the low shoulder of the distant hills, and went sailing through the dull, hazy night air close down over the masts of the shipping like a torch, tipping wavelets and walls and turrets with blood-red, and making the shadows black as ink. The Turkish fire had dropped away at sunset, as was its custom; the weary Christians lay about in tired groups upon the walls; hour by hour slipped by, and nothing happened. The silence and the heat were so oppressive, that Oswald, who had been on foot all day, working like

the meanest slave at trench or stakes, and had supped with Margaret and Samana, counselled them to bed early, saying the Turks would surely not come that night at least, and they had gone as he suggested. Hour after hour went by—it was midnight, then one o'clock; the sentinels were tramping wearily upon the stone pavements below, and you could hear the chafe of the hawsers against the month-dry sides of the imprisoned merchant vessels away in the inner harbour, or now and then a sleepy dog barking for a minute at the moon, just setting blood-red into the red, distant sea. The Hospitaller had thrown himself down upon a couch in the lower corridors of St. Nicholas, and dropped into a ready soldier-sleep. Round him, sleeping by their weapons, were his garrison, increased by some few score yeomen and Brothers, whom D'Aubusson had sent when the storming of the tower seemed close at hand; and up in the strong, vaulted chamber where fate and Oswald's ambitions imprisoned her, Margaret was lying, half undressed, upon her bed in the starlight, tossing to and fro, and dozing now and then with strange fitful visions of green English pastures and cool acorn woods, changing swiftly, in that uneasy sleep, into hectic scenes of love and battle under her sleepy lids,—she dozed and waked in the heavy black quiet of the night, and watched the green lanterns of the fire-flies floating round the chamber, and, sighing for morning, dozed again a little after midnight;

and then all on a sudden started up upon her elbow. Gods! what was it? All hell was loose on a sudden; the heavy stillness of the summer night had suddenly flared into an angry crimson dawn that was streaking her chamber with lines of brightness wherever light could come through crack or cranny, and a hideous mad tumult was in the air. She clapped her hands upon her ears, leaping but half dressed as she was from bed, and fairly reeled, for all Elias over the water was rimmed with red, tier on tier, and rank on rank; and all the monstrous artillery of the Turks was roaring its thunders at the tower, and a wild hurricane of shot was whistling above and below and striking with horrible thuds that made the great walls quake and rattle on rampart and buttress. It was so sudden she turned sick and dizzy for a minute, hardly knowing whether her senses were her own—for a minute she was too bewildered even to think; then, with a dreadful consciousness that the moment of the city's fate and her own had come, the girl leapt to the great arch, and, screening herself as much as might be from the flying splinters which every shot drove from the walls, looked out.

Southward over the black harbour waters the hills beyond the town were ribbed with the red light of cannon flashes and signal fires; nearer by, round the harbour walls, cressets and beacons in that lurid picture were tossing out wild ribbon-like flames under great canopies of smoke as the watchers poured oil

and pitch upon them ; while away northward over the water—it would have been beautiful if it were not so terrible and fraught with cruelty and terror for every one in the luckless town—the Moslem fleet, driven by countless oars, with a thousand twinkling lights dancing on the rippling water, was drawing closer and closer in across the harbour mouth, like some splendid net set on every mesh with a glittering gem.

Before her startled eye could half comprehend that gleaming picture of black and gold which had leapt suddenly into being from the cover of the night, or her trembling ears could make out any separate sounds in the wild uproar of the Turkish cannonade and the crash of the shot again and again on the crumbling turrets overhead, the oaken door of the chamber within was thrown open, and Oswald de Montaigne himself came rushing in—Oswald in his fighting mood, flushed and frowning, broad shouldered and magnificent, his dark face all agleam with the hero shine,—a very different Oswald from the silken, wayward, and unstable cousin who, but a little while before, had cajoled and sighed, and pressed her hand and let it drop again in hesitation as the light winds of his varying mood drove him now here now there. And at his heels came bursting into the room a score or two of hospitallers, their chain mail shining over their white-cross tunics in the red shine without, naked swords in hand,—a gallant rush of silk and steel that flooded Margaret's

room, and poured, eager and cheering, headlong to the ramparts beyond.

"Back, sweet maid! back!" cried Oswald, turning from the stream a minute; "this is no place for you. Back to some safe corner, and fear nothing! By God's leave all will presently be well."

"Nay, but," answered Lady Walsingham, her eyes bright and her cheek too flushed, "my father's daughter never cowered yet when she could help, though it were but ever so little. Give me the smallest task of usefulness, and it will be more welcome than the best security."

"Spoken like a Saxon girl, and one worthy to be a soldier's bride. Then light the cressets, dear lady, and put the pitch to boil; 'tis not work for those white fingers, but we have not a single man to spare to-night." And he strode away to spread out his small force to the best advantage, for already the long-planned assault was developing, and no more succour could reach the tower across the shot-swept mole, or by the harbour already thronged with Turkish boats and barges, even had D'Aubusson the men to send.

Margaret, whose blood, all of soldier origin, was now pulsing finely in her veins, snatching a green scarf from a settle, knotted it round her middle, for she had no time to dress; then, twining her long soft hair into one great rope, and piling it on her head with quick fingers, she lit the oil lamps in their green bronze standards, and, as she swept across the room,

now the very centre of the fight, she took a hasty woman's look at her fair self in a great steel mirror hanging on the wall, and smiled a little—the image she saw there was so obviously beautiful, so like a glimpse of a pale goddess come down to meddle in the fights of men—then slipped out and did as she was bid, passing here and there amongst the hurrying knights, and striding, though it made her shiver a little, over the mangled bodies of two who had already fallen; lighting torch and brasier, and putting the iron ladles of pitch to heat upon the flames that springing up to the sky from a hundred different points about the walls, made those grey ramparts all a-glimmer, crimson and yellow, in the shine; while for a fathom round the shallow harbour water heaved red and ghostly, like a lake of the nether world in the gloom.

And now the cannonade somewhat went down, for Turk and Christian were coming to close quarters, and the besiegers could no longer fire without harm to their own comrades. But it made small difference; the whole place was a pandemonium; the bells of the chapels were ringing out wild alarms; the Franks were shouting all along the walls, the Moslems yelling as though the fight would go to him who made the greatest noise. Down on the sandy flats below the shrine of St. Anthony it seemed bright day, for there, amid a galaxy of dancing lights, through which the guns on the palace top now and again cut black

avenues, the Turks were preparing to row a cumbrous pontoon they had constructed over to the mole. Out at sea St. Nicholas was hedged by a fleet, now close in, crowded with howling Moslems. 'Twas all hideous tumult far and near as Margaret finished her round, and came back, pale but brave, to her post by the chamber portico—a strange shifting picture of fire and smoke, of glittering water down below, of ebony towers and pinnacles above outlined sharp and clear against the glow beyond,—a thunderous babel of voices, "the roar of Christendom breast to breast with hell," as Oswald had said; and she leant for a minute dazed against the Norman archway, and wondered if this could be the same world in which but a space before she had been idly sleeping.

As the cannonade dropped down and stopped, every eye was straining into the darkness, every ear was intent to catch the first sound of the stormers coming. And sure enough, in another minute or two, out of the darkness into the broad ring of light below swept a Turkish barge crammed with eager men—a beautiful, wonderful sight as it slipped quickly forward over the smoke-tinted water, until those who watched upon the walls could see the throng of sallow faces on board, all turned eagerly upwards,—could see the light twinkling in their staring eyes, the shine of the jewels on the hilts of their yataghans, and the egret plumes nodding in the bronze cap of the leader as he stood, naked blade in hand and foot on prow,

frowning proudly into the glare above, while he waited another yard or two to bound ashore. And then, as Margaret stared with fascination at that first instalment of savage pagan splendour, feeling the barge was but half real it looked so like a fairy ship manned by spirits, a gunner by her tipped his piece, and, glancing down the bronze runnel, put his match to the touch-hole. A flash and a roar as the great gun was fired at pistol range, and all that barge and the fierce gallant company she carried were heaved into the air, and scattered over the dark outer sea in a thousand bloody fragments.

And now the great game had begun in earnest. The frothy water had scarcely ceased to eddy and boil over the spot where the ill-fated boat had been a moment before when another swept out, and came skimming down right through the litter of the first, then another and another. It was like enchantment to see those ships thronged with men in glittering harness spring, deadly and beautiful, from the outside nothingness into this fierce inner arena of contest. Quicker and quicker they swept in, screaming and shouting, the bronze rowers straining at their oars till the muscles on their naked backs stood up like cordage; and all around the long walls of St. Nicholas cannon and culverin, loaded to the muzzle, were tipped and fired till the air was heavy and sulphurous, and the great forked prongs of flame from their trembling iron mouths seemed actually to touch

the boats and scorch those up within. Quicker and quicker they came, through a sea that was churned whiter than a mill-race by the fierce rain of shot, and littered so thick with plank and oar and splinter and drowned or dying men that the rearward boats could hardly move. And wilder and wilder the shouting—no human gunners could make head against that interminable, baying pack below, they crowded in so close it was all a solid seething mass of humanity within the circle of the torches' glare, they gained the rocks and came yelling to the first stockade; they surged against it under twenty green banners like a splendid living wave, and tossed and heaved, and fell back, and then came on again as new succours joined, and fell in heaving ranks against that bulwark, and clustered and clamoured and cheered and groaned and died, till the broad ditch was choked with writhing bodies, and the screaming victorious tide and the staggering flags came lopping over like the irresistible sea that some trivial bulwark has for a moment thwarted! The inner ditch, that a second ago had been bright with the Christian livery, was in a trice russet and gold with the burnouses of El Jezireh and Ismid. They rushed up the next bank, driving back the few defenders who stood against them there, and, the glacis won, dashed for the northern portal of the tower. That great gate opened for a moment to take in the handful of Christian soldiers who fled to its shelter, then was slammed to—just in time—just as

the foremost Turks were but ten yards away, and as bolt and beams shot into their sockets the joyful yelling of five thousand pagan throats in the darkness told D'Aubusson, standing with folded arms grim and grave upon his palace top, and all that long dark line of citizens that peered anxious and fearful into the red glow about St. Nicholas, that her first line had fallen, and stake and torture to every man in Rhodes, and slavery to every woman, were so much the nearer.

Meanwhile the fight went on. The knights and their allies, now hemmed in upon the tower, had scarcely had time to replenish their torches and cressets and scatter their force to the best advantage along the walls when the attack burst upon them again. While the outer defences were being stormed the Turks had laboriously dragged their great pontoon bridge over from the opposite flats; at the same time, three thousand janissaries, conveyed by the fleet, had landed behind the mole. Both these forces brought ladders with them, and, while slingers and archers kept up a rain of missiles upon the upper ramparts, the escaladers rushed shrieking forward and planted their ladders, thick as pines in a green Sclavonian forest, against the walls.

Then would you have seen fighting that it were worth going a long day's journey to witness. The stormers, thick as bees, clustered to those ladders in yelling swathes, and as fast as one went down and all its mangled freight lay crushed and howling

beneath it, another was set up. Like baying wolves the Moslems came rushing from the darkness and surged round the base of the doomed citadel, and clambered and clustered till the Christians who fought and sweated on the ramparts, a thin surging line of white-cross doublets dimly seen through the smoke and confusion, turned sick and faint of heart to note their endless numbers. There was no time to work the guns, it was all fierce hand-to-hand struggle, without a thought of mercy or quarter. A dozen times the reckless valour of the Moslems won the ramparts for a moment, and a dozen times the splendid fury of Oswald de Montaigne and his companions drove them back. Through the reek and the smoke men would come and go like phantoms, Frank and Arab in deadly wrestle would stagger and sway and roll over headlong on to the rocks below; strong men would reel and fall, hit by unseen hands; while helmets and turbans and plumes tossed all along the edge of battle, and talwars clattered on broadswords, and bucklers and targets rang; and the boiling pitch and oil, spilled from its pots upon the escaladers, ran flaming down the castle walls, and spurted through the gutters in a thousand crimson rivulets.

There were amongst those with the hospitallers some half-dozen little pages of good family, who had followed great captains to the war, and were here to-night by special leave, as they laughingly said,

for holiday. Some of these with Margaret Walsingham had all the evening flitted through the fight and done yeomen service, dragging back the wounded, and keeping the flambeaux blazing; others—it was a fierce age, when baby hands could grasp a blade almost from the cradle—had hung upon the outskirts of the storm, and crept between the fighting soldiers' legs, stabbing and killing all the Moslems they could reach. About an hour before the dawn it happened, after a savage rush of the enemy, one gigantic mamaluke had passed unnoticed through the Christian line, and, whirling sword in hand, had rushed headlong into Margaret's room. But sharp-eyed William Saxby saw him, and, crying to his playmates, in a trice five of those gallant little cockerels, all with glittering poniards in their hands, their green velvet coats wound round their other arm for fence, their fair hair flying in the taper lights, were dancing round that ruffian.

At first he laughed, and turning mockingly to bay, shook his sword as though he thought the very gleam of that great blade would scare them. And then he scowled and frowned, and began to see it was deadly earnest that those warlike striplings meant. He backed off till he was close down by Margaret's empty white bed, tumbled and bare, just as she had sprung from it; making great sweeps as he went, and, fierce and active as young lurchers, his light-haired foemen danced about him. The fighting blood

of their forefathers was running red in their veins; their curly heads were chock full of deeds of chivalry and giant tales. Why, they thought, this was the finest game they had ever played! And Jamie Bardsley, he was but ten years old, burst out into a warlike verse, and flicked his green coat into the giant's face; and as the Moslem swore a deep oath in Arabic and made a forward lunge, young Lucey of Marnhill ran in behind and drove his poniard a hand-breadth in under the Turkish girdle. With a yell of pain the mamaluke spun round upon his heel, and, with a swinging blow, cut the poor page down from shoulder to breast, and forward he fell in a tumble, writhing and screaming and clutching at Margaret's white sheets. As he dropped, quick as thought his playmates had sprung at the fenceless body of the Moslem, and had driven their pretty toy luncheon-blades in; and then were away again, screaming and crying with excitement, before he could turn on them.

And now the giant's blood was soaking through his white burnous. He staggered and leant a space against the bedpost, his lips all over bloody foam, his eyes rolling, and his teeth champing with the pain, and then made a furious rush upon his assailants, striking such mad blows here and there as had shorn their small bodies through and through had they met the steel; but quick and nimble, they leapt to this side and to that, and back the great

bully of the Scutari bazaars staggered to his corner by the bed as those deadly little poniards twinkled around him again. That mimic battle raged until the urchins were as breathless and mad with the incense of combat as their elders in the greater storm that, unnoticed by them for the moment, thundered and roared outside, and then the Turk essayed another furious rush at those screaming, dancing elves who hemmed him in; his foot caught in the satin coverlet of the bed, and over he went, headlong, thundering out asprawl upon the floor, his brazen helmet rolling one way and his great sword spinning clanking from his hand in another, and in a second those small furies were on him—Jove! they were golden-headed devils for the moment in their battle madness,—and in and in the poniards went, quicker than thought, rising horribly red for a new plunge each time,—in and in, until the Moslem was dead as ever was son of Islam that had won to Paradise by devious ways. And even then they were not satiated. Gallant little Saxby, flushed and hot with victory, put his baby knee between the bully's shoulders as he lay face downwards, and, dragging back his heavy head by the black forelock, "Bismillah!" he laughed in elfin glee, mocking the Moslem butchers at their stalls, "Bismillah! in the name of Allah the Compassionate!" and, so saying, drew his dinner-knife across the pagan throat from ear to ear.

And Margaret—all through that wild night, with

a quick light foot and a foreboding heart, she had flitted from point to point doing all the might: dragging back the wounded and tying up their hurts, feeding the torches, fetching new weapons for those who lost or broke their own; and twice at least during the evening that tall fair lady, with the brave smile and firm and gentle hand, saved St. Nicholas, and with it Rhodes, and so on, in widening sequence, all Eastern Christendom perhaps. The first time it was by chance; the second, by a deed of desperate strength and courage which must be chronicled here though a hundred like deeds of valour and resolution done that night go by unnoticed.

The first time—it was but a few minutes after the pages had killed the big Turk in her room, and the Hospitallers were as hard-pressed as ever on the walls—she was tending to a wounded soldier who, being thirsty, asked for a drink of water. Lady Walsingham at once took a horn cup, and with it ran out into the ante-room at the head of the stairs beyond where a Cyprus jar of water stood. She passed across the bare flags of that great hall, dimly lighted by the wicks burning in the oil lamps; she crossed the red glare of the fight that came streaming in from where the knights toiled and shouted and struggled, and, lifting the draperies of the screen on that kindly errand, looked without—then started and cried aloud. There, unmasked so suddenly, face to face with her, only waiting to make their rush for

others who came stealing on tiptoe up the curling stony stairs even as she looked, were a dozen bearded Moslems! It was treachery and ruin. Some false sentinel or some unguarded door had done it. Her heart turned faint within her. She hurled the cup into the swarthy face of the nearest foeman, and, dropping the tapestry that in another second twenty fierce hands had brushed aside again, screamed, "Oswald! Oswald! quick, quick! The Turk has won in below; the Turk comes up the stairs!" And by the grace of St. John himself Oswald heard her where he stood, bloody and smoke-begrimed in the battle flame. He came rushing in with six strong Hospitallers behind him, and saw the infidel, and, roaring with dismay and anger like a mountain bull, went thundering unto the Moslem ruck that had halted for a second by the doorway. Half Europe at that minute perhaps hung upon the strength of those two arms. There was not a peasant behind his plough-haft from the Danube to the Vistula to whom that fight was nothing. There was not a mother sitting with babe at breast before her cottage door from Seres to Tuscany who might not have watched with bated breath the fight which meant so much to one and all. Margaret knew what it meant, and, coward for once, picked a fallen sword from off the floor, and set her back against the further walls, hiding her face and daring not to look, as close and horrible now there flashed upon her

shut eyes a ghastly picture of the green crescent flag waving from St. Nicholas, and a thousand pointed stakes in a broad avenue leading inland from the city gates, on each a writhing knight, and a thousand hapless women in the Rhodian market-place, herself amongst them, being bartered from hand to hand for trinkets by a swarthy victorious horde. And then she lifted her eyes, for expectation overcame her, and there was Oswald, fighting with the strength of a god and the fury of a devil.

Three men had fallen before him, one lying bloody and gasping across Margaret's bed; and then his sword broke at the hilt. He snatched up another from a stand by the wall, and with it was raging along the front of the invaders, who wavered and shrunk from that tremendous champion. They fell back, reaching the curtained arch, where the tapestry was torn into a thousand shreds by that wild war of waving steel and hands and helms. Back he drove them—happily it was but a boat's crew who had clambered in at an unguarded window, and unsupported by their fellows—back by a red path, slippery and horrible, littered with men who screamed and gnashed their teeth and grovelled on the floor under De Montaigne's heel,—back until they were all cooped up at the head of the stairs; and there, in the twilight, the furious Count reaped them like ripe grain under a reaper sickle. Margaret never saw such fighting; never in her life had she

thought such strength lay in human arms and sinews. Those tremendous blows of his fell through sword and shield and helmet like the white lightning through the cottage thatch, fiery, impetuous, and swift, one upon another, now here now there, lopping strong men down all along the front of that tangled fight, his weapon crashing through brazen helmets like wild nuts under an urchin's hammer, sprinkling the grey roof overhead with crimson stains.

Back he and his drove them till the stairway was knee-deep in Moslems, and then down to those twining stony stairs the fight went thundering, Moslem and Christian tumbling and stabbing and plunging in a mad confusion through which Oswald raged like the embodied inspiration of battle itself! Margaret staggered out of the great chamber after them, and, looking down the stairway, crossed herself, and gasped out half a prayer of thanks to St. John, for the fight was all but done on the landing below, and the few infidels who lived were leaping from the casements. St. Nicholas was saved, and in a minute back came De Montaigne, flushed and panting, and would have walked right past her, passion still twitching in his face, tightening and loosening his fingers convulsively upon his axe haft; but she touched him on the arm until, after a moment, he recognized her again, whereon she spoke such quick words of thankfulness for deliverance and praise to him as were fit recompense and end to a strong

fight, and raised a gleam of stern pleasure even under that soldier's mask of sweat and smoke.

"And now let *me* win some praise albeit of trivial deed and merit," said Margaret, detaining him from the outside fight one minute. "Is there anything that one of little strength but much good will can do for this tower to-night?"

Oswald thought a minute, then he said, "You see, lady, how it goes, how hard the fight is, and how constant the danger. Yet there *is* one thing in which sharp eyes and quick wit may serve more than strong swords. This onset from below just quelled and our long sweep of dusky walls fill me with uneasiness. Therefore, if you will, sweet maid, play sentinel for an hour. Trip round the further battlement all ears and eyes, and if a Moslem caftan shows, or an oar dips into the harbour water, fly with the news to us."

"I go at once," answered the lady; "right proud of my charge!"

"Keep in the shadows," cried the Hospitaller, as he turned back to the fight. "I had not sent you, but there 'tis all still and quiet, and great service goes with small risk."

Margaret threaded her way behind the confusion of the front line of defenders until she came to a part which Oswald's needs and the havoc which death was playing with his ranks had depleated of watchers. She had finished the greater part of her errand, and

now in the rearward of the tower the roar of the fight came fitful and subdued, while a rolling canopy of black smoke, shot with momentary gleams of crimson, hung overhead or eddied slowly away across the bay. The fierce scene she had left shone in its own dreadful radiance, as though the mouths of hell were shining straight upon that face of the castle; but here all was in deep black shadow, the turret path was lonely and dim, a few pale stars twinkled overhead in the smoke-mottled sky, while, underneath, the harbour water lay sluggish and black, its ugly sombre waves floating hither and thither innumerable dead bodies of Moslem and Christian, which curvetted to each other in friendly wise, and hobnobbed, now that their fighting days were done, head to head and feet to feet, in every swirl and eddy. Margaret was brave and resolute, as became her race and birth; yet as she slipped round through those dim shadows all her nerves were thrilling, and her heart was beating wildly under her loose silken vest. Twice she started, as fancy or an echo filled the hollows of the walls with voices of terror and anger; and once she tripped over a dusky body that she thought in the first moment of her surprise was certainly Moslem and alive!

But all was quiet on the southern side. She had made her round, and was just turning to go back; she had made ten paces, when, all of a sudden, her ears, sharpened by danger, heard something grinding

over the edge of the parapet, and then in another minute a smothered voice, whereof the guttural Arab could not be mistaken even in the throbbing of her own heart, came in a whisper on the air. With a desperate effort of her courage over her natural fear, her white skirt gathered up in one hand, and the sharp short blade she still carried in the other, she stept quickly to the waist-high parapet and looked over. And as she did so, out of the ugly darkness on the other side, scarcely two feet away, rose suddenly before her a fierce, swarthy face, topped by the round steel cap and egret-plumes of a Moslem captain,—a fierce, sullen black face with a broad flat nose upon it, and small bloodshot eyes that flashed with the yellow light of battle and sack, and coarse strong lips that grinned under a ragged black moustache. All the woman blood in Margaret ran cold down to her feet at that grim apparition; and then back—hot and red, like the battle spot which burnt upon her cheek—came the blood of her soldier-kinsmen: and seeing in a quick second of perception the dark shadow of the raft which had brought this new storming party under cover of the darkness to the unguarded wall, the long crazy ladder by which they were mounting perched upon the slippery rocks below and now crowded with escaladers with this their leader at their head, with one fierce sudden impulse she drew back that white blade, and made a lunge at the Moslem's throat.

That astute warrior saw the action, and, quick as the stab was, and well directed, more quickly he had thrown it lightly off with the brazen greave upon his free left arm; and then as Margaret came forward with the swing of her thrust, quicker than it takes to write it, his bare hand had taken a deep strong clutch of her white night-wear. Then began a tremendous struggle between the grim soldier of the crescent and the English maiden, the first, infinitely the stronger but hampered by his position, trying all he knew to pull her over on whom in truth hung at that moment the fate of Rhodes; while she, the tall English girl, with fear and wrath and shame nerving her to splendid effort, with hands and knees close-pressed against the masonry, and white teeth set fast, was holding on like death itself. And so they swayed and rocked till Margaret's gear was all in shreds and her white bosom was bare in the starlight; and still that ruffian tugged and wrenched.

They were face to face across the rampart, eye to eye, and mouth to mouth; he was so near she could feel his hot quick breath upon her forehead and his iron fingers against her white skin. She knew her strength was going, in a minute or two the stars began to dance in golden parabolas, and, knowing the horror of what would come next and how much hung upon her, just as the game was all but lost she conceived a swift idea; she threw herself back with all her remaining strength as swiftly as the

thought rose, and then—raising high the knife she had not dropped—as the Moslem's bare wrist, dragged after her, lay for a moment over the edge of the parapet clear and visible, she brought down that keen edge upon it, true, certain, and remorseless, and shore the hand off that held her—shore through bone and skin and muscle,—so fierce and true, that the bloody limb that grew it tossed back and disappeared in the darkness while those crooked fingers, loosened from their hold, fell twitching on the flag-stones, as she shudderingly shook them from her.

Scarcely was she rid of one peril when another confronted her. Margaret had hardly time to throw down the knife and lean for a breathing space against a friendly buttress, she had hardly time to draw her frayed rough fingers across her dazed and frightened eyes, when she heard with a stifled scream those on the ladder free themselves from the Turk who had fallen fainting athwart them, she saw him, through a gulley-hole, spin down the night, a dusky blot, and fall with a terrible thud on to the rocks far below,—and now here were his comrades coming up again, with yataghans in mouths and brass morions glittering in the starlight, a savage, hungry crew without charity or compunction, maddened by their leader's fall, and straining up for the rampart like clustering bees. The brave girl looked over into the depth, with one hand stilling the wild beating of her

heart and the other on the turret edge,—she looked down, and there were those hungry faces all in a line coming up at her, the nearest not ten rungs distant; she glanced down the long, lonely shadows of the ramparts to where the hard-beset Christians fought unseen on the other face of the stronghold, and knew there was no hope to come in time from there; then back to those straining foes,—she saw Rhodes and herself in their remorseless hands; and just below her were the two round tops of the Moslem ladder!

If she could sway it, Rhodes might yet be safe! There was no time to think; with a stifled cry of "Mother of Christ, help and forgive me!" she had leapt out in her torn fair things upon the gurgoyles and spouting, and was straining at the ladder with hand and foot—straining madly, wildly, till the muscles on those arms, whose velvet softness Hepburn praised so much, stood up like iron cordage. Oh, Christ! would it never go. The infidels were not a yard below,—she could see their teeth and eyes and wide-spread nostrils, as they raced for salvation,—and again and again she tugged and pushed with furious effort, and then—dreadful victory!—it did slip an inch, and then another inch, and another, just as the foremost Moslem was within striking distance,—and, as Margaret hid her face with her hand and a thrill of horror ran down her, the ladder top had somehow gone from her reach, and was scraping a semi-circle on the wall, and had slipped on the slippery rocks

below, and swung into the air, and stood there a space, with its clinging human load, tottering like a huge, dusky poplar, and then, like that same great tree when the axes have cut it through below, trembled and wavered, and at last went crashing out to destruction, and overwhelmed in one horrible, common ruin all those luckless escaladers upon it!

CHAPTER VII.

When the grey dawn brightened at last over Rhodes, and the short twilight gave place in quick sequence to the golds of sunrise, the great assault ended, and the town was saved. At the very earliest flush of the morning the guns on the grand master's palace top and from every point of the city walls whence a view of the mole could be obtained, which had been of necessity silent through the night, now woke up as Oswald had foreseen, one by one and tier by tier. As the light broadened, and friend and foe could be distinguished, all those iron mouths were opened, and a tornado of merciless shot swept causeway and sea. It wanted but this to finish the work which the splendid defence of the tower had nearly accomplished, and ten minutes after sunrise the demoralized Turks were flying on every side. Their pontoon across the harbour was sunk; a hundred of their vessels had been destroyed by the fire-ships of the knights; ladders and bridges and boats unnumbered lay shattered round the base of the tall tower, upon whose walls all night their bravest had hurled themselves unavailingly; and in great swathes and mounds

upon the mole, and floating in long ranks on the shallows under the city walls, the Moslems left, as the result of the night's work, two thousand men at arms and many hundreds of their greatest captains and princes.

As the day brightened still more, the cannonade dropped down again, dying out like the sullen thunder of a retreating storm, for presently there was nothing left to fire upon—the scattered remnant of the Turks had drawn away to their camp upon the hills, and the Turkish fleet had fallen back beyond the Khartar rocks, six hundred yards from the harbour mouth. The smoke and mist of battle drifted slowly away upon the morning air; and for a time, as friends and foes, alike exhausted, slept by their bloody weapons, a heavy peace, that was almost palpable after the turmoil of the night, hung over everything.

Then presently the gulls flew in from seaward, and the crows, ever quick to scent the pillage, came flocking down from the red cliffs of Karki and Monolithos; and crows and gulls, black wings and white, hundreds of them, were presently riding about the harbour on the dead Moslems. Here, standing on one leg upon the bare back of a Turk who floated awash and face downwards on the tide, was a great ivory gull preening himself and calling hoarse welcomes to his kind as they hurried in from the Ægean; and yonder, on another body, a crow and gull were fighting for a Wallachian prince's liver, hopping and screaming

and pecking at each other as they pranced about his wounded side and probed the red holes in it in the strangest fashion. Here a dusky-feathered villain would be strutting up and down the chest of a floating mamaluke, seeming, by his corvine swagger, to say, "It was I who killed him, and I share with no one!" and there another, screaming at any who came within an ell of him, with black claws set deep into the soldier's flesh, was fiercely tugging at the golden-tissued vest which kept his breakfast from him; and yet another just beyond, with bloody beak hammering at a great captain's glazed and staring eyes; and the bright, low sun, meanwhile was glossing the raven plumage purple and green, and touching the white feathers of the clamorous gulls, as they laughed and rioted amongst the slain, until each crimson-beaked marauder shone like a seraph in pearl and gold.

And as the day strengthened other pillagers came down. From the earliest daylight grey human figures, dimly seen, had been prowling about amongst the rocks, stripping and robbing the mounds of dead Moslems who lay piled in parti-coloured heaps all round the bottom of that breach to which they had rushed all night long with such reckless gallantry. And, as the light increased, these early stragglers were joined by others, more shameless, of those who had learned to look upon a spent-battle place as a rich harvest field; they came dropping in by twos and threes from the town, until presently the long

mole was alive with them. By the base of the tower they were thick as carrion flies in summer, and scrambling and crawling like them, the living clambering about on the heaps of the dead, and tugging and pulling and quarrelling over the burdens of costly silks and rich mail which presently began to rise, as they worked, in glittering piles upon the beach. As they grew warm in their horrible labour, they took heart and countenance from each other: those who had begun in the earliest dawn by stealthily emptying wallet-bags and turning the golden byzants out upon the sand from Moslem pouches, had gone on, as the light brightened and others of those ghouls came to share, to the stripping of mail and harness; and then, so quickly did the greed spread amongst those parti-coloured swashbucklers and hangers-on to the fringe of chivalry from all the unclean places of Christian Europe, that presently they were stripping the fallen Turks—stripping them of every hapless thing they wore, until the beach was like a washing yard, and the hacked and ruddy gear of prince and peasant, torn from bleeding limbs, was lying about like white leaves upon the beeches,—and athwart every rock was a naked Moslem, horrible and mangled, with black mouth wide open, and fierce fists clenched upon the empty air perhaps, and staring white eyes glaring with an empty fixity of surprise and terror into the blue summer sky above. And round about those dead men fought and quarrelled those human

wolves; cursing and screaming and jesting as they tore the linen from the unresisting bodies of their foemen, lopping off arms and legs for golden Syrian bangles, and fingers for their rings—making the place a horrible pandemonium.

So many were the dead and so broad the causeway of interlocked bodies mingled with rubbish and fallen masonry reaching from the crumbling ramparts of St. John to the blue harbour water at its feet, that the spoilers for a long time had more than they could do in stripping those lying uppermost upon that tremendous mound of carnage. When at last they had plundered these, some set to work to excavate in the human mass for others not yet touched, and some turned their callous eyes upon the bodies which lay glimmering and grimacing just beneath the surface of the clear blue Ægean waves. Throwing off belt and doublet with many a merry joke they dived for those sodden princes and captains, hauling them to land with laughter and shouting, stripping them mother-naked, and casting their water-spoiled gear about until the crisp golden rim of the summer sea was choked with all that wretched spoil. Others, meanwhile, fell to angling for those who still floated in the harbour currents; 'twas not so profitable, but those jolly villains were so merry over it that all the seaward walls were presently lined with people come to watch, and on the palace top the sun flashed now and then upon a knightly helmet. As the nut-brown

pagans floated here and there with the white gulls flapping above their blistered faces, and the crows perched upon their jewelled bosoms, the Christian camp-followers threw hooks and grapnels at them; and when one caught, the shameless uproar would have done no discredit to a holy feast day. A gay rascal of Aveyron, wearing on his scarlet tunic the silver badge of a petty Vabres lordling, had just hooked a dead Philistine captain about twenty yards from shore—had hooked him by the cheek; the current ran humming round the rocks just there, the Moslem was big and heavy, the line was light. Like a foul-hooked salmon he spun and twirled, and came on and went off, while scarlet tunic scrambled after him down the littered beach with all the yelling, laughing crowd upon his heels jesting and advising. To and fro the dead Moslem wallowed, and spun, and turned his great reproachful eyes upon those wretches; 'twas all in the balance whether they landed him or not, when down the jetty came galloping a precentor from the palace. Reining back his steed at the very end of the paved causeway, and, waving his golden rod of office above his head, he cried to the crowd below him—

"Cease! cease! all of you, in the name of St. John and his servant our Master!" Then, as his presence made a momentary lull in the disorder he called again, "Are you Christians, or beasts and devils who thus disgrace us and this place—doing that to brave

foemen which cut-throat pirates would blush to think of? Back, sirs, back to your quarters; back, every one of you, gentle or simple. 'Tis D'Aubusson sends me, and you well know he does not bid twice."

But the crowd was made of rude stuff. They drowned the precentor's voice in a yell of derision; and one fellow, stepping out from amongst them, cried—

"A fig for thee and thy golden toasting-stick. Back to thy master, and tell him his grey beard wags on the chin of an ass; say we hold all him and his cheaper than the dirtiest smock in yonder heap. And give him this," said that youth of nimble wit, suddenly stooping and lifting by the scalp lock a severed Turkish head; "say 'tis from us as a savouring to his midday porridge-pot." And as he spoke he whirled that grisly thing round and threw it full in the precentor's face.

Without a word the stern black rider turned, and, striking his spurs against his horse, went thundering back to the palace. The game, a few minutes afterwards, was just beginning anew, when there came a glint of sunshine on a swiftly uncovered gun upon the ramparts of the Grand Master's citadel, a crash, and a cloud of smoke; and the next instant an avenging iron shot was tearing through the ranks of the human fishers, mixing dead and dying in horrible confusion, scattering the heaps of golden mail and the linen on every hand, splintering the rocks and

tearing up the yellow sand until, its errand done, it went at last screaming out into the bay. D'Aubusson had spoken! Three minutes afterwards not a pillager was anywhere in sight.

Nothing could exceed the completeness of the rout of the Turkish stormers on that still June evening. Not only had they lost immensely in men and leaders, but all their confidence and certainty of success had gone at the same time. The sicknesses which had ravaged their camp for the last few weeks now broke out, as they will amongst broken and dispirited soldiers, with redoubled fury; and Paleologus himself was so overwhelmed by the failure of plans which he thought certain of success, that he shut himself into his tent for three days, and in silent fury nursed his disappointment alone. The same cause enormously invigorated the gallant bands who had held the towers and walls of Rhodes so long and so desperately against overwhelming odds. The murmurs of discontent and treachery which had been lately heard in the town were now hushed; and D'Aubusson, watchful of friend and foe alike, took good care to husband the new sense of confidence and trust. He displayed in a procession all the arms, armour, and banners left by the Turks in their rout; and in case there should still be any waverers whose personal feelings were more accessible than their military pride, he had a grim trophy erected in the market-places of faggots and stakes prepared by the enemy

for impaling Christians on, and lately captured in a sally. That suggestive stack was festooned with the halters the Turks had brought ready in their girdles to bind the Rhodian women captive with; above was pinned Paleologus' stern order, "All men in Rhodes to the fire and stake, all women to the soldiery!" and underneath the Master had had it written, with like grim brevity, "These await us if we fail!"

Any one looking, as from his turrets Oswald De Montaigne looked during the next few days, over that city rejoicing anew in the consciousness of her strength, and then over that other city, that great listless camp beyond the walls, might well have said, "This already is the victress, that the vanquished," and have been deceived, as Oswald was, into thinking the siege was all but done.

It was a consideration meaning much to him. After the strong exertion and excitement of the fight a heavy lassitude had settled down upon his body, leaving his eager and impetuous mind alone free to act and work. Hour by hour he would sit in an angle of his battered but invulnerable bastions, frowning stonily over the town and the grey green ledges of the olive gardens out beyond, while he strove to harmonize his great necessities with the better instincts of a nature which was wayward and weak, but not wholly bad. It was not the least of his perplexities that Margaret Walsingham's splendid

courage and noble qualities, the constant presence of her sweet unruffled face shining brave and tender and imperturbable on him hour by hour during these last few dreadful days had kindled something afresh in his heart which, if it was not the same love he had once given to his fair-haired cousin away in her English home, yet had enough of that deep first love in it to throw a new colour over all those fatal schemes he now built and unbuilt twenty times a day.

Was there no way, he asked himself, with sullen persistency, but, like a slinking scoundrel, hiding his villainy in the last of the dust and *mêlée* of the siege now rolling away into the past, to force that brave fair girl by odious means into marriage with him; bartering all her happiness, and so much as was left of his own knightly honour, to gratify with the pawn of Hemsworth and Raithby those lean hungry usurers who thronged about him? Was there no way but that, or one other—Saluzzio! Saluzzio the plausible, the ready witted,—Saluzzio who could mix a poison cup and scatter rose petals so sweetly on its rim that the lost soul who sipped thereof slid ambrosially into darkness, and never guessed who brewed that draught until presently it woke with a scream and a start in hell!—Saluzzio the light-footed, the gently gliding friend of the necessitous, with his ear at every key-hole, and his hand in every money-bag,—the gentle Greek who could whisper something civil as he ran his fingers down a helpless rival's ribs to choose the

easiest passage for his dagger-point,—Saluzzio who loved to feel the big life flutter and die under his crooked palms in a strangled victim's throat!

Again and again Oswald cursed the new softness with which Margaret's courage had instilled him, and the pale stately face of his cousin that rose constant before his eyes, and seemed to bar with ever-growing strength this only way from his difficulties. To give Margaret over to the Rhodian had been a thought which irked his fiery spirit even when, in the first press of his disappointment, he hated Lady Walsingham; and now, when close contact and all the generous perception of his keen mind had newly impressed her nobleness upon him, it made him scowl and fume to see that shameful way open to him whichever side he turned, and none other.

And yet, what else was there to do? The convenient dust and confusion of the siege seemed rolling away; the town was saved, he thought, and the sullen thunder of a gun now and then from the slopes of the hills sounded but like a cloak for the Moslem's retreat. With peace must and would come again all those pressing needs which had but been in abeyance for a time. Even if it happened that his high fame and the splendid stand he had made for Rhodes tempted the Brotherhood itself to overlook all the long score that stood against him, yet neither fame nor patriotism, he knew, would still the claims of the base men to

whom he was in pawn, or render less deadly the means they had to force him to their wishes.

"If only Hepburn had died in the *mêlée!*" he cried again and again, striding passionately up and down the turret walls, and shaking his fist bitterly against the distant ramparts, whence the proud red English pennons danced defiantly on the breeze. But Hepburn lived; Hepburn had outstood a score of fights, and, brave and furious, had hurled back the Turks in wild confusion a hundred times from his ward, winning honour and recognition from every one, and, like the great bluff yeoman-knight he was, had set his honest soul into the combat, and, after each onset, sent splendid pagan spoil into the master's palace, and a soldier scrawl, brief and to the point, by a tripping page to Margaret. But all his heart was in the fight; 'twas no time, he swore in good round Saxon, for simpering at a maiden's footstool, even though the maid were Margaret Walsingham. That lady was as safe, he knew, as she could be in any place in Rhodes; he had seen her some once or twice, and had kissed her white hands like a vassal touching the fingers of his suzerain—it was all he asked, and contented him. As for treachery or secret danger approaching the person of that white lady of his, such a thought never once crossed his trustful mind.

"And 'tis to yonder bull-headed yokel," Oswald scowled, "that I give place! A gross rough churl who has no art in love or war but strength and luck;

a coarse hedge-pudding—one who rushes bellowing through the press against all knightly nicety, bearing opposition down before him by ponderous bulk of arm and body, a gallant bully who will woo and wear my cousin as though she were of stuff no better than the great-girthed country wench who were fitter mate for him. And must I stand back while this prince of swineherds, this beef-coarse captain of heavy-footed English serfs snatches my prize away as that carrion crow has snatched his dinner from yonder sulky moulting falcon on the pinnacle!"

As for Samana, poor faithful Samana, she sunk into insignificance now that the old needs were revived so strongly. He still loved her better, no doubt, than he loved Margaret; and even when his admiration of the latter was at its keenest he never thought of the mistress of the broad English acres but as a splendid solution of his difficulties, an object to be won and used, and set by; a beautiful mock-wife who should disperse his enemies by a wave of her golden hand, and reign a virgin queen, if she wished, in cold white state amongst her English halls, while Oswald, chin in air once more, free and unshackled, could sun himself in the light of softer eyes, and, roaming where he listed, meet, with the old untamed defiance, the frown of great and little.

Such were the bitter thoughts and fancies that ran through his head during those days closely following on the repulse of the enemy from his walls. And

now that ambition was in arms again, love suffered as was said, and Samana's tenderness when they met only irked him. Could she not see he had other things to think of? he muttered sullenly to himself one morning when she had tried to tempt him to the old trysting place, and repulsing the sweet Greek girl as he had never done before, he chilled the hot blood of her jealous Southern love, and sent it back cold and aching to her heart. When, again, as happened now and then, he and Margaret came together, the knowledge of all that there was to be bestowed in that small hand of hers, and the perception of how little was for him, how keen his needs and how short the time remaining wherein they might be met made him groan in spirit. The one great golden opportunity which fate vouchsafed seemed slipping away; and, as hour went after hour and that white person, which must be his by fair or foul, seemed as unattainable as ever, his strong unruly temper rose reckless and more reckless every moment, until anything was possible to his desperation, and it wanted but a touch to turn him into the fatal path.

Then, the next morning, came Saluzzio, keen and crafty and remorseless, and found the ground riper for his black husbandry than he had hoped. He fanned Oswald's fury to a white heat, stinging and goading him; and, well knowing how the pride of that strong soldier hated his familiarity, he was familiar past all decency, and bullied and hectored one who could

not bear in calm mood a rough speech from princely lips, and by nice artifice of malice showed all the horrible nakedness of the degradation lying before him, how certain it was, how shameful, how complete, and how easy the way therefrom!

He told Oswald next that each plot laid for Andrew Hepburn's life had failed; that the rugged honesty of the knight, aided by "such luck as compassionate heaven often lends to fools"—those were his bitter words—Hepburn had escaped the worst that poison, treachery, or malice could do, and was high in favour. De Montaigne knew it. And then Saluzzio told him, what he also knew, that when the Turkish flags were furled, as they might be furled any moment, and the crescent fleet that had ridden a long summer month out in the blue Ægean took the discomfited infidels away to Marmarice, Oswald's chances of Raithby Hall and Hemsworth Park would not be worth a moment's purchase.

"Depend on it," cried the Greek, "that with the last curl of white cannon-smoke on yonder hill your hopes too end. And I tell you, Count de Montaigne, what is a hundred times more important, mine also end with that. Do you think that if you play gentleman now, and trifle away these moments, that when it is too late *I* shall melt in turn with tenderness over the pretty spectacle of your compunctions, and give you time and grace again? Nay! Down with you, Count de Montaigne, down into the blackest depth, I

say, if you play fool and fail me. For those sweet yellow shekels that in such a trustful moment as, praise God, comes to me but once in a lifetime, I let you waste upon your accursed pleasures, I would see you flayed alive and never wince; these old fingers that are so lean and trembling close upon your fate as they have closed upon many another's; and by all I hold sacred, by the black hand of St. John that lies mouldering in yonder crypt, by the bones of Him whose body sleeps in the orchard tomb outside the Holy City, I swear I will have you down to hell, even though I tumble thither with you, making you in your ruin envious of the repute of some black-hearted slave, if you fool me now. But there!" the tempter added in another lighter tone, "he is little better than a madman who strives to threaten the brave and indomitable knight, Count Oswald de Montaigne, one who has broken more hearts and slit more throats than any other gentle pricker of his age in Europe. 'Tis not to be thought of that one who has cut a bloody way from a poor trooper's saddle to high command, and has for long years stamped the weak and lowly under his charger's hoofs, and frowned down the frown of the great, all for his own advantage, will now stand by, cap in hand, and humbly hold an English yeoman's bridle stirrup while that same boor curvets to church, taking Oswald's place with Oswald's rightful bride by altar, board, and bed,—rising, as Oswald sets, a hero in all men's eyes, on

Oswald's fame;—'tis absurd, impossible, is it not, dear comrade?" And then the Jew would let his ugly laughter ring through the place where they met, until De Montaigne could have strangled for once and all that odious mocking merriment in that lean old throat with more pleasure than he had ever strangled Turk or pagan.

Nearer and nearer to the edge of the catastrophe the Greek shouldered the yielding, struggling Christian, numbing the last of his better instincts with his baneful sophistries; firing his greed and playing on his passions; flaunting his inevitable ruin before him, and lashing him into fury, as he safely knew he could: until the strong man, torn with conflicting thoughts, the hot blood of shame and fear and desperation throbbing on his forehead, became a plaything in the lean old traitor's hands.

Thus urged by Saluzzio to bring matters to a crisis, he at last gave way, and sullenly acquiescing in the imperativeness of action which the Greek painted in such ruddy colours, screwed his courage to the effort, and, while he waited for his chance, strove to drown the last sparks of his conscience by turning upon Margaret Walsingham all the wrath and bitterness which lay smouldering in his heart.

For a time he had to wait, and, feverish and impatient, the silence and desolation now hanging over his battered turrets became horrible to him. He flitted moodily from place to place, and, envious

of the noise and excitement, he would now and then go down to the southern ramparts where the Turkish guns were fitfully battering the crumbling walls. And there, perhaps, he lit on Hepburn, bulky and jovial, his bronze face scorched with a month of sunshine and cannon smoke,—a new terror to Oswald who fled him, and went back again into the town, and drank strong drink until a hundred times he thought the fierce wine had turned into red fury in his veins, and his courage was high enough at last; and as many times, as he paused in the grey shadow of the tower where Margaret sat, wine and courage alike failed him in a moment.

At length, one evening in the dusk, he met Saluzzio on the mole leading to his turret, and, as it happened, while they stood and talked, Samana came tripping down the quay, bent upon an errand to the market. The Greek, ever quick to take a chance, seized on Oswald's arm.

"Look!" he cried as the girl came towards them, "a golden opportunity sent by fate itself to us laggard and unworthy mortals! To the breach, Sir Hospitaller, or your ripe courage will grow rotten by hanging up so long; up to the lady's bower while I take this sweet interloper of mine away townwards for an hour, so that you may not suffer interruption,—up to her secret chamber as quick as knightly legs can go. She is alone; no one moves; the night is dark: stand on no nice ceremony, but in to her;

put your case clearly, and give her three minutes to decide whether she prefers you — or me," he hissed. "Stand, I say, on no ceremony; put it roundly to her; whine and beg if you must, as a beginning,—then bully, and if neither work, try something else that may. Oh, 'tis safe enough! no one would hear her, though she roared like the brass heifer on Rhodos. Now go!" Oswald de Montaigne knew the time had come, and without a word turned on his heels and strode away into the darkness of the tower, desperately resolved upon that interview which meant so much to them all.

Samana saw him pass by her like a black shadow, scarcely knowing him, for all her eyes were upon her father. With a little cry of delight she fled to that grey old man, who, on his part, forgot everything else in an instant as she tripped across the passage-way. It was as pretty a sight as you could see, the meeting of those two who were the world to each other. All the cunning greed melted out of the old man's face in the shine of his sweet daughter's presence, and, instead, love and delight and pride beamed there, till, for a moment, he was almost beautiful to look at. And aglow with pleasure, Samana, flushing lovely crimson under her olive skin, cried, "Father, father!" and ran to him, and leapt into his arms, and threw her soft wrists about his wrinkled neck, and kissed the lean usurer's cheeks again and again, and was drawn deep into his heart

for a moment before she was released from those arms, breathless and rosy.

Saluzzio put his hand upon her shoulders, and, looking lovingly at her, cried, "Why, honey! you grow more like your sweet mother every day you live!" then took her gently to him again, and ran his grey fingers in tremulous tenderness through the loose fray of her soft black hair, and, proud and tender, kissed her round smooth forehead once or twice, muttering as he did so, "God's malediction for ever light on him who harms you, sweet one!" And so presently, wrapping her cloak about her tenderly against a wind that did not blow, he took her hand in his, and listening to the prattle of her soft Greek tongue as thirstily as one might listen to the splash of long silent water in a desert, he led the girl down the mole, and away into the labyrinth of the town.

CHAPTER VIII.

MEANWHILE Oswald de Montaigne, flushed with wine and passion, with the black frown that only marked him when his heart was hardest and stress heaviest on him, walked swiftly down the causeway.

The black towers of his stronghold, rising tier on tier into the dark sky overhead, were gloomy and deserted, save where here and there in the lower rounds a narrow window-slit gleamed red with the soldiers' fires within, and, far above them all, Margaret's lamp shone solitary and lonely in the blank expanse of walls. The stars were twinkling on the still harbour water, the sentinels were dozing by the gate as Oswald strode through it. He muttered the password to those wardens, and mounted the curling stair still littered with the débris of the great fight and stained shoulder-high with blood of those who had fallen there. He passed through the empty anteroom; the broad oak door beyond was on the latch. With heart beating high he stepped across that threshold, silently locking the door behind him and putting the gilded key in his girdle; then, lightly

lifting the tapestries, found himself in the sombre inner chamber.

He looked round. All was quiet; the taper burned dimly; for a minute he could see nothing: and then, as his eager eyes went round the gloomy hall, under the glow of an oil lamp burning by the shrine in a niche of the further wall, he made out Margaret Walsingham. She was upon her knees at evening prayer, her white hands locked together over the rosary they clasped, her face buried in her arms as she leant against the cushioned bench in front, her loose hair was all adrift in the pale glimmer of the light above; and, as Oswald watched the girl from the doorway, he could see that she was crying. For a minute he gazed at her with deep and painful admiration; then, slowly crossing the floor, stood at Margaret's side, bending over the girl like the embodiment of fate, and, putting out a hand from under his priestly cloak, laid it heavily upon her shoulder.

With a cry of terror Lady Walsingham looked up, and, seeing that black figure in the dark cloak of St. John, sprang up with the tears still bright in her eyes, and stared until, smiling at her own fears and reassured for the moment, "Oswald!" she exclaimed, "indeed you frightened me, you came so softly." And then, surreptitiously brushing the bright drops from her lids, "See!" the lady laughed, "how these long dreadful weeks have told upon me! my poor nerves fail at the touch even of your kinsman

hand,—I thought for a moment it was some one less friendly." And Oswald could find nothing to say for a space, but stood with folded arms nursing his passion and hardening his heart.

Poor Margaret's welcome died away upon the lips that uttered it, the outstretched hands dropped, and, with a feeling that changed swiftly and silently from surprise and sorrow to outright fear, she read something of his errand in De Montaigne's face. That half-knowledge, that intuitive woman's guess sent a little shiver of terror down her. Never had she felt so lonely as at that moment, never so far from help. The grey walls shut her in, the lights burned dimly, no one would hear her if she cried; and there, opposite, was that desperate gambler with fate, who loved her and had been slighted, who must win in everything she lost: and at the thought of all he might have come to ask for, an angry flush passed across the lady's face, and, turning full upon the Hospitaller, she drew herself up, changing by a scarcely visible change from the fair, tearful girl of a moment ago into a cold collected woman.

Oswald felt the alteration and it irritated him; then, striding up to her, "Margaret," he cried, "'tis no time for mincing matters with you. I came to-night, knowing you were alone, to tell you that the old mask has dropped, and great love and no less necessities override all lesser things, and bring me here again to your footstool, the most eager lover that

ever breathed a wish and claimed its recompense all in a breath." And throwing himself on one knee, while his strong frame shook with the many passions within, Oswald de Montaigne took the lady's hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Oswald," she cried, tugging at her imprisoned fingers, "Oswald, are you mad?"

"Ay, lady, in truth mad,—bitter, sullen mad of love,—and need."

"Indeed you must be mad. Oh, cousin, think what it is you say! think how you wrong me and my faith to him whom presently I hope to take for husband——"

"It is a forsworn faith, Lady Walsingham," said the soldier, rising to his feet. "I claim, as I have claimed before, on that older love of ours. By every tie of obligation your truth holds you to the compact made between us long ago; shame lies only in shifting here and there, and putting holy compacts off like distasteful garments."

"Think of your Order, and those great vows you desecrate in seeking me."

"Taunt me not with that, Margaret," cried Oswald. "This vain-glorious brotherhood of crack-brained monks sits as lightly to me as by God's grace I sit light to them in turn. See here, Lady Margaret," cried the desperate knight, unfastening the jewel which buckled his cloak across his breast and throwing cape and belt upon the ground,—"see

here; thus would I strip myself of belt and vestment for your sake, and stamp my heels thus and thus upon the insignia of their monkish superstition, breaking for you through all their canons, and holding henceforth as nothing to your love those cold dull obligations their pedantry enforces."

"And is it for you to hold me to constancy—you who dishonour in one sentence the rule you give in another? 'Putting holy compacts off like distasteful garments!' Why, cousin, 'tis what you have just done to a very nicety! Your own words condemn you."

"I came not to argue," said Oswald, slowly and sullenly, as he felt his bad cause and poor advocacy no match for the sharp wit of his much-tried cousin.

"No!" cried the lady, with the quick blood of those ancestors which she shared in common with him mounting swiftly to her forehead. "And by Christ Himself it is well; it does not admit of argument. I tell you, Count Oswald de Montaigne, that though once you had some share in my girlish thoughts, yet fancy changes. Fancy, Count Oswald, as I think you hold yourself, is free as wind; and I tell you again, and once for all, that which was between us is over. Friend to me you may be hereafter, though nothing lately shows it; but suitor never—ah, though it were my last breath that said the word! Do I speak clear enough? dost understand? or does the Rhodian air blunt the nice edge of

comprehension, as it does of courtesy and knightly duty?"

"Oh, you speak clear enough, lady."

"Why, then," cried Margaret, mistaking his tone and meaning, "let me be the first to say I grieve for my hot speech, and, taking it back, proffer you instead, dear Oswald, a friendship which will outwear twenty such gusty passions as this which now besets you." And dropping her hand lightly upon his arm, the fair girl looked up into his face.

But the soldier shook the light touch fiercely off, and, grasping her arm in turn with fingers which burnt like iron bands, swung her round, and cried—

"Friendship, you jade! friendship, you beautiful mocker of my needs! Do you think it is through dreaming of a dole of tepid friendship that Oswald has stalked, blank-eyed and sag-headed, through the town for weeks, and, tearing his doublet open so that the cool wings of the whistling shot might calm the fever that burns therein, has stood by the hour on smoking ramparts, courting the coy death that flits unheeding by, until all men wonder and shun him? Dost think it is for a pittance of the great whole he hopes for, to beg the crumbs from another man's banquet, that Oswald comes to you to-night, hollow-cheeked and furious-eyed as yonder mirror says he comes? Margaret, you are mad and blind, or else so great a coward that you dare not let your

tongue acknowledge that which your heart knows all too well."

"I am no coward, cousin."

"No, I believe it; and pray God you be a fool as little. Margaret, you have spoken, and clearly, as you claimed; now 'tis my turn. Listen! There was a time when this love which I proffer you had been a gift which my pride would not have borne to see rough handled; and, I confess it, but the half of what you have said to-night would have so spoiled all, that our love would have been as odious to me as you, and my first effort would have been to tear it out and throw it from me. But, lady, time changes circumstances, and to-night I am not free to humour these niceties of feeling. I am come to you with a mind so fully made up that, to be frank, asking you of yourself is in itself but a courteous mask of speech over a matter to which there is but one answer. Mine you are by old compact; mine you are here to-night by the strong right these walls and oaken doors do give me; and mine, in this very room, before the daylight comes, made wife as certainly as priest and book and candle can do it, you become—or else——"

"What else, courteous knight?"

"Nay, lady; put me not to answer that. Sufficient it is for you to guess that which I dare not say. Put that black alternative aside, take this real love I offer you, blaming fate, if you will, for a necessity which

many a proud maid would give all she had to be within, and which, I swear, shall sit like silken fetters on you."

"Never, Hospitaller!"

"Once mine, Margaret, you are safe from poisoned bowl and traitor's knife, and all those things which here follow necessarily upon your wealth and loneliness."

"I do not fear them."

"If I went back to-night ill-answered, Lady Walsingham, you would have great cause to."

"Ay, now I begin to see it all! And so, alive or dead, Oswald looks to have Tasborough and Gillingham, and to that great end will follow the lady of his choice with equal pleasure to grave or altar! Shame for ever on you—you a Christian champion, you a gentle knight! You preach constancy and aim to the hand of a free maiden! Oswald de Montaigne, you are a stain on your Order, a shame to your Faith, a ruffian, a coward bully! See here! the daughter of that John Walsingham who once gave you of his large unasking hospitality, and who would now whip you out of Christendom were he but alive, tells you she scorns you and your roof," cried the furious lady, gathering her skirts up over her arm; "scorns every stone of these walls into which, friendless, and trusting to a kinsman's tenderness and honour, she rashly came; despises you for a mean mercenary braggart, who throws the cloak of an honest love over

his low cupidity, and, without half the gallantry of his brother cut-throat footpads out in yonder dark alleys, breaks truth and trust and friendship and every obligation of the gentle quality his manners shame, to possess himself of the hand and havings of a defenceless girl who trusted him! Oswald de Montaigne, you are a thief and a coward, and Margaret Walsingham tells you here in your hall—here where your strong walls and her unprotectedness have plucked your courage up to a venture of which your lowest horse-boy would be ashamed, that she scorns and despises you—would rather take as husband the dullest-witted churl who lies ale-sodden in the crypt below, would rather sue the friendship of a base city scavenger or trust her body and her soul to the forbearance of the poorest soldier that lies to-night camped out yonder, than wed, or think of it, or stay alone, for one unnecessary minute, with a knight so shameless and a kinsman so unkind!"

The proud lady's voice wavered as she finished, but not the resolution backing it; and then, as Oswald stood with folded arms and eyes fixed upon the ground in sullen shame, every bitter word she had said burning like hot rain into his spirit, she suddenly swept by him, and, swift as an arrow, ran to the door —it was her only chance, she thought,—and, tearing back the tapestry, seized the gorgon-headed handle. With all her strength Margaret strove to move it, and yet it would not turn! For a moment she did not

understand, but stood there wrenching that iron ring. "Perhaps the wicket was locked." She looked for the key, and, with a heart which stood still and a fear that seemed to be climbing up from her very feet, Margaret saw that it was gone. Again in furious desperation the handle was tried. Sweet lady! she might as well have tried to move Elia; and when the knowledge of that dawned and for the first time in the evening the girl really recognized her peril, her courage wavered for a moment, and, panting and beautiful and betrayed, she leant a space in her soft white gear against the dark iron-studded oak of the doorway.

The Hospitaller had not moved—he knew too well the futility of that attempt to escape—but stood still grimly brooding there, and for a time neither stirred while Lady Walsingham, with back to the door, remained eyeing with fascinated, wide-open eyed wonder the gaoler whom she had a moment before defied and insulted. It was so still that, amid the thumping of her own heart beneath its satin vest, the girl could hear, faint and small, the sound of a soldier drunken chorus and the noise of men-at-arms rioting in the wards below. Outside, the black water was lapping on the jagged rocks many score feet under the castle walls: kind, dark water, its arms were better than Oswald's to-night! Perhaps, if he saw her standing on the very brink of the parapet yonder, with a dreadful death at her feet, he might

relent: it were worth trying. And swift again she moved from the doorway, and passed like a white glimmer across the room. But, quick as the lady was, Oswald was quicker, and with two strides was in the window-arch before her.

"Not so, cousin!" he said, guessing her motive, —"not so--or, at least, not to-night!" And back she shrank from him and his touch, knowing right well that twenty men could scarcely force that gate when that great champion stood against them in it.

Like a hunted animal seeking for a way of escape the victim fell back from the captor, and stared round the grim walls that rose windowless to the raftered ceiling above. There was no help anywhere—the heavy door locked yonder, and in the oriel the man made desperate and lawless by love and necessity who stood next heir to her wealth, grim and unshakable; not a friendly sound in the great lonely tower: and yonder her uncovered bed with its day curtains drawn back. She turned hastily from it, and neared again the shrine at which she had been praying, with its velvet cushion and dimly burning votive taper. Margaret looked at the shrine for a minute, and a gleam of hope lit the despair on her face. Glancing first at Oswald, who still stood scowling at the floor, lightly as a shadow she passed over to the chair, and, lifting a cushion, picked up and slipped into her dress a keen straight-edged dagger that

days before she had hidden there in vague forewarning of such a chance as this.

The knife was scarcely tucked away, and poor Margaret's hands were still outstretched in silent supplication to the image above the taper, when the Hospitaller roused himself, and came down upon her with a swoop like an eagle. "Margaret," he cried, "'tis folly and madness for us to stand here chaffering through the night, and I will not wait. Come, come! 'tis not a fate so bad I offer you. Many nobler girls than you would give half their lives to be so compelled. 'Tis not as though I were ill-featured, a bully, twice your age and a stranger. Coz, yield you must, and now; and afterwards, I swear by my honour, by St. John, by yonder shrine which witnesses my vow, I will give you the utmost liberty you can ask for, making up then by such indulgences as no other wife does look to for this rough wooing. But yield you must—and now. All the black time of hesitation I have gone through seems to be behind me like a horrible morass; and here, this minute, I will win to a clear heaven of certainty, or go straight down to hell hand in hand with you. Speak, Margaret, speak, one way or another before yonder cloud across the bay veils the star to which it drifts,—speak! My very soul revolts to bear the burden of a single minute's uncertainty; the last drop of my patience is poured out."

"Never, then, discourteous and cruel! A score of times I have said it——"

"Why then, you sweet she-fury, you must be persuaded," cried the Hospitaller, mad with many passions. And in a second he had seized the struggling girl in his heavy arms, and, drowning her unheeded screams in her own hair, lifted the maid fairly from the floor, and bore her struggling backwards.

Strong as the lady was, in those great arms her fiercest efforts were no more than the fluttering of a bird. Across the room he staggered with his burden, and now he had her back down by where the single oil lamp was burning in its socket. There De Montaigne paused a minute, taking one long look at the fair form which perforce lay throbbing with useless struggles in his arms, and at the fair head with its loose brown hair all wildly adrift upon his shoulders, —the angry face, as much as he could see of it,— and the straining, pinioned arms;—a sweet girl indeed, and worth a little venture, he laughed fiercely to himself. Then, dropping Margaret's wrists for a moment, but still keeping his left arm round the unhappy girl, whose bosom he could feel throbbing hard in unison with his own as she lay crushed against him, he suddenly spread forth his hand and put out the light.

And now there was nothing to see by but the faint glimmer of a single votive taper that burned in a dim red glass before the distant shrine. It was so dark, all the furniture about the lonely chamber was black shadows, the walls, the floor, the roof unseen. Oswald

could not even see Margaret's face as he stared down for a moment at it; but he knew where the brown hair was and the hot cheeks and the pale lips, and, bending his head, he kissed the girl again and again as he carried her backwards,—stifled her cries with kisses,—and, still not satisfied, bent down again for more and more, until as, certain now of his conquering strength, he bent a fifth time over her, Margaret, whose right hand had been partially freed when the Hospitaller put out the light, with one final effort regained it; and in a second, as those lips that had so recently sworn chastity and continence sought hers again, suddenly, in the red twilight, across them swift and fiercely was drawn the flat face of that keen knife for which she had gone a few minutes before to the shrine and had hidden in her dress.

Oswald was accustomed to naked steel, but the action was so unexpected and suggestive, the cold touch of that clammy blade was so different to the touch of the hot lips he looked for, it cut so right athwart his base dream of certainty, that with a start and a cry his arms loosened instinctively, and, seizing that only chance, Margaret threw herself from out them. The instant she was free the lady turned on him like an offended Juno, terrible in her wrath. She shook out her crumpled gear, and swept away with one quick incisive movement the tangled coils of her beautiful hair; then, panting with shame and rage, but not one whit afraid, she faced him, taking a

stride nearer, and, after a pause in which they could hear each other's hearts beating, said, in a slow voice of which the perfect control did but emphasize the fiery passion that burnt behind it—

"A moment ago, Oswald de Montaigne, you gave me two alternatives, and bid me choose; now, in like kind, I give you two, and equally short a time for choice." Then, turning the point of the knife she held to her own heart, she cried, "This is no leaf torn from a wandering minstrel's love-play—this is no schoolgirl fury that I threaten, but grim real earnest. Choose, De Montaigne,—choose, coward, whom Heaven thwarts even at the moment of base victory! —choose whether you will go instant and unquestioning hence, or, staying, look on while Margaret dies shamefully by her own hand here at your remorseless feet?"

There was no need to question that inflexible voice and steady purpose. Indeed the catastrophe seemed so close,—already the keen point of that knife, pressed in her fervour too near, had unknown to the lady raised a black blood stain upon her linen—that, even before she had done speaking, Oswald, with imploring hands outstretched and terror in his eyes, was falling back before her. He *could* not see her die like that! Fierce as his determination had been, and selfish and weak as he was, the old affection framed in a new deep admiration still existed unacknowledged somewhere in him. Saluzzio might have done it, but

Oswald *could* not—she was so beautiful, so like an offended Juno towering there in the red twilight, it might have to be presently—that brave bright life might have to be spilled for his necessities; but not now, not here, by her own hand, horribly and dreadfully, at feet that still wore knightly spurs, and under the shelter of his own roof.

"Margaret, Margaret!" he cried, stepping back, "have a care. Surely—surely you are mad!"

"Ay, cousin," she laughed, mocking him in his own words, "'mad, blind mad, mad of need and necessity'!" And then again, in that imperious way, pressing with her right hand the knife so near into her breast that De Montaigne groaned, and feared to see the black blood spurt forth at any moment, and with the other pointing to the door, "Back, bully! back forsworn knight! back treacherous kinsman! or those grey stones shall have a tale to tell shall make every honest man who hears it blush and hang his head, and spit even to listen while De Montaigne's name be mentioned."

"I go, lady,—I go," cried the Hospitaller, falling back before her with deprecating hands outstretched, and eyes wide ope with fear, and love and admiration even in that dreadful moment striving with his shame and terror. And stride by stride and step by step through the gloom, like a she-panther, with eyes burning, every muscle set, gorgon haired, she followed Oswald, forcing him grimly back. At the curtains he

stopped a minute. If she was proud and stubborn of spirit no less was he, and for a moment he paused with his hand upon the latchet key, half hoping even then the woman heart might falter behind that queenly front and give him another chance.

But there was not a tremble in those stern eyes that watched him so inflexibly. He saw a white uplifted finger still pointing to the exit, and a glint of red light ran down that horrible remorseless never-wavering poniard blade; and with a last fierce angry cry of shame and love and disappointment, he opened the door, and, striding through, hurled it to behind him.

It was in no pleasant mood the soldier strode down the winding stony stairs, hearing as he went bolt and key turned on him; and now, once more clear of the lady's beauty, and knowing he had been beaten in his own stronghold, beaten when every single chance of circumstance and time were in his favour, all the worst that was in Oswald came to the surface again.

His own room in the lower rounds was too small for him; he walked angrily up and down the stony corridor out beyond, blaming himself with intemperate passion for weakness and indecision, and cursing Margaret again and again as the origin of all his trouble. Then, presently, even the corridor was too circumscribed; he must go out and walk upon the mole, and see if the night air would cool the fever of his

disappointment. And as he went down the stairs who should there be coming up but Samana herself, fresh from her marketing, bringing a whiff of sweet clean happiness with her, and a face radiant with gentle smiles. The Hospitaller could not avoid her, the stairway was so narrow, and thus in a minute they were front to front, and, beaming at this new pleasure, the Greek dropped her warm small hand upon the soldier's.

"Oswald!" she said, "oh, I am so happy! I have had such a lovely walk with my sweetest father, and he has bought me a new circlet for my hair, with a hundred golden spangles on it; and a new sash, and green slippers—the smallest, dearest pair they are in all the market: we searched a hundred booths for them."

"To hell with thee and thy trinkets!" cried the furious knight, as with a fierce gesture of anger he threw off her loving caress, striking, as he did so, the pretty fairings from her hand. "Out on you!" he scowled; "away, you swarthy jade! Let me by. The very sight of you or yours makes me mad to-night."

But Samana could not believe her ears. She blocked the way with soft loving persistence, and tried to take Oswald's hand again, while looking wonderingly up into his face.

"Oswald!" she persisted, "oh, surely, you do not know me, or you could not speak so rough! 'Tis I—Samana—she who only lives now in your friendship."

"I know it, and hate alike you and Rhodes; and lust and love and pride and usury, and every accursed tangle of this net with which I struggle all in vain."

"Oswald, dear Oswald, you are not yourself, you look so flushed and strange. Oh, what has happened?"

"Out of my way, I say, you jade," cried De Montaigne; "or my mood is such I may be tempted to cast you hence a hundred feet into the hall, and so be rid at least of one of you," and as poor Samana shrank overwhelmed and frightened against the wall, the soldier pushed disdainfully by her, and passing down the stairs went out into the night.

A little way along the harbour mole he came upon Saluzzio, walking slowly home after having seen his daughter safe to the tower gate. As the Greek recognized the knight the silent pleasure in his face as he thought over the evening's walk with the daughter whom he loved almost as well as his own life quickly changed to the expressionless mask of cynicism behind which lay hid all his real feeling.

"Salutation, sir!" he said, taking off his cap for a moment, as the knight came up, in a manner much fuller of mockery than respect. "An it were not unpardonable to break in upon the delightful dreams of one just come from his mistress's chamber, might a poor outstander ask how the meeting prospered?"

"Bad, Saluzzio!—bad as ever meeting could go.

I played my stakes even as you said to the very letter, and lost them one by one, until, in the end, yonder white fury drove me profitless from her presence like a whipped schoolboy, slamming bolt and bar behind my back there in my own very stronghold. I come to you bankrupt of resource, and fit for any baseness."

"'Tis a common condition," smiled the Greek, "of the brave gentlemen who honour Saluzzio with their friendship."

"I say I come bankrupt of resource——"

"And so, like many another junker of blood and spirit whose pleasure quite outruns his purse and wit, you would fain borrow of the poor Greek's heaven-lent invention?"

"Ay! Rake amongst the blackest devices of your mind, you canting Shadow of Evil, and tell me what comes next."

"Oh, readily enough! But first step back here out of sight of those idle eyes which can never see two gentlemen talking in this sweet Rhodes of ours without thinking they are hatching treason, and let me know more closely what you did, and how yonder fair lady with the long throttle, of which my itching fingers have been dreaming this two nights, took it." And, leading the Hospitaller aside to a sheltered spot under cover of a ruined mound of the sand-bags with which the mole had been protected when St. Nicholas was the chief object of the Turkish attack, those two

conspirators, so ill matched in everything but aim, conferred for a time.

When they parted without leave-taking, presently, the Greek's eyes were bright with the light of a new, expectant pleasure—a bright, wolfish twinkle, such as some hungry beast might have who scented a fair quarry close ahead. And Oswald de Montaigne's angry face, as he turned back to his keep, was paler than the white cross of the Order shining in the starlight on his shoulder; his strong hands clutched his consecrated cloak nervously about him; his very shadow, as it flitted by in the wavering lights, startled him. And well it might; for he had said the fatal word, and given Margaret Walsingham over, soul and body, to the tender mercies of as remorseless a villain as had ever pandered, even in that lawless age, to avarice, or extinguished a sweet life in the cause of wickedness and folly.

CHAPTER IX.

For an hour or more after that interview Margaret Walsingham paced up and down the vaulted chamber, which she now felt was a prison indeed; and the more she thought of it the more the danger of her position seemed to grow. Oswald, whose stubborn nature the lady knew too well to suppose he would be content with one rebuff, was somewhere in the chambers beneath; and every footfall of sleepy sentinel in the corridors made her quake lest it was himself returning. The Greek, Saluzzio, whose presence was a nightmare, kept watch below. There was no safety any longer in the tower and soon her resolution was made: Margaret had determined to fly to the palace and beg the protection of D'Aubusson, trusting to that veteran's age and high rank to afford a protection the friendless girl stood so much in need of.

Hastily donning the darkest coloured dress to be found, and shrouding her figure under a wide, Moorish woman's cloak, the heiress pulled the hood down; and then, kissing the feet of the Virgin in the shrine, and putting the knife that had already stood her in such good stead into her bodice, Lady Walsingham

was ready to start. Then the thought of Samana arose. Should she rouse and take that timorous maid, who, all unmindful of what had happened, had a little time before passed through the great room to the inner chamber, and now was dreaming peacefully of a blissful hour spent with that beloved parent of hers? At first Margaret's female heart yearned even for that frail companionship on the dangerous errand she was going; but then there arose a suspicion, not quite new, of the girl who had some secret understanding of look and tone, though what exactly Margaret could not guess, with Oswald, and was daughter and confidante to that Greek who was the greatest terror of them all. No! it were best to leave Samana to pleasant dreams, for even if she were free of all duplicity, Margaret argued, the girl were like to be more hindrance than help. She would go alone; "the kind saints who had befriended their supplicant so far would still be with her on a journey whereof every turn was beset with maiden perils." So, sitting to the tressel table for a minute, she wrote a hasty line to the sleeping handmaid, bidding her not to be alarmed at her absence nor say anything of it, but wait quietly until she returned or sent further word; and, folding the missive, left it by the inner door. Then listening to every sound, and slipping from shadow to shadow, she stole down the unguarded staircase, and by the drowsy sentinels, and so out into the open and the friendly night.

A little time afterwards, as D'Aubusson was passing solitarily to and fro in the cloistered courtyard of his citadel, conning new confusion for the Turk, word was brought to him that a stranger craved a moment with him, and, accessible to high or low, the great soldier nodded assent, and the visitor was ushered in,—a tall slim supplicant, in long cape, who came quickly across the courtyard, standing irresolute a moment until they were alone, then with quick nervous fingers seized the hand of the princely soldier-monk, and, pressing it twice most filially to her lips, threw back the hood, and showed a tear-stained face as sweet and womanly as any man could hope to look upon. And Margaret's venture prospered—for of course it was she. The grey hero raised that fair visitor gravely and gently to her feet, and, waiting until she was more collected, asked her name and errand. Margaret told the first, and it proved the best introduction she could have come provided with.

"What!" cried D'Aubusson, fairly amazed; "you the only daughter of old John Walsingham, my dear loved comrade in arms and sidesman in a hundred fights?"

"Even so, noble Prior," said the lady.

"And alone in Rhodes like this, at night—all but barefooted, unattended!" And the great soldier bent grave eyes of wonder and scrutiny upon that fair averted face before him, while its owner strove to

find a head and beginning for what she had to tell him. Presently he asked, "Art married?"

And the English girl answered, "No; or, at least, not yet."

"Ay," smiled the Prior of St. John, behind his grizzled moustache—"a saving clause with maids! Why, then, this fair hand that lies so tremblingly within my own holds in dower Kilverstone and Gillingham, and Raithby Hall, and all those other splendid havings that made my dear dead comrade the envy as he was the admiration of Western knighthood. And such an heiress out alone o'night, plodding the sad streets of this beleaguered city of ours like a vagrant beggar-maid of small account! Now, how comes this, dear lady? If by such misfortune as I can remedy, fear nothing, but speak it out; for by my faith your red eyes and wistfulness would make an errant knight out of the greyest friar that ever supped on husks and water."

Thus invited, Margaret told her tale, striving as best she could (though the deception went but a small way with the keen-eyed veteran who listened so courteously to the story) to minimize her cousin's wrong; and when it was ended, D'Aubusson, who knew how much sorely battered Rhodes would stand in need of princely donants when the siege was over, and what advantage to his Order it might prove to show honour to this slim queen of broad English acres, even without regarding the bonds of the old

love he had borne for her father, took Lady Walsingham into the palace, giving her rooms near his own, with two yeomen's wives for tiring women. And so that night, for the first time since the fight began, Margaret slept in certain security.

Meanwhile, back in the harbour tower the night wore out. Far above, in the inner room, grey with the dust of the bombardment and the litter of the great shot which had starred and cracked its roof, Samana lay on her pallet, dreaming strange dreams, over which her father's love and her lover's new coldness threw changing colours. And down below, Oswald de Montaigne paced to and fro, now going over the incidents of the scene that had just taken place between himself and his cousin, or striving to think how best to bend to his will the English heiress, who, he never doubted, was weeping her courage out in the upper chamber; and then pausing in his angry stride to listen to the slow booming of the Turkish guns, which, away to the southward, for days had been sullenly hammering at the English ramparts, and to-night seemed noisier than ever.

Sleep he could not, and after tossing about an uneasy hour upon the couch he got up, just as the day was breaking, and, throwing a cloak about him, mounted the stairs, and crossing the ante-room that led to Margaret's chamber he halted for a minute, listening to catch a sound, if it might be, of the sleeping lady. But all was still within, and, turning

to the left, the soldier let himself out by a little wicket-door unto the isolated turret-ledge upon the harbour side of the town. The morning was grey and chilly, as grey and melancholy as his fortunes, he thought, the sky sombre above and the sea leaden below. Under Mount Elia, where the shadows were still blackest, every now and then a crimson flush, like the shine of a distant storm, shone for a moment on the face of the night, and the Hospitaller could distinctly hear the rattle and roar of falling masonry where each shot told on the crumbling ramparts. He could even smell the sickly odour of the powder as the saltpetre came up on the damp low morning wind, clammy and evil suggesting, and it sickened him in his sensitive mood. He would go over to the English ward, he thought, and mingle again for an hour in the brave game that had ebbed away from his deserted post.

De Montaigne drew his cloak closer around him, and had turned back to the portal door with that idea in view, when, in the act of entering, he caught sight of a man approaching from the direction of the ruined outer bastion amongst the rocks, at whose base he and Samana had sat out many a happy sunny afternoon. The figure was coming stealthily along the lower wall, not with the free step of an honest man, but treading close against the masonry, and slinking from cover to cover with a secret thief-like motion. De Montaigne would have known

that soundless approach amongst a thousand, and a bitter frown of fear and hatred clouded his face as he recognized Saluzzio. And yet the strange fascination of the man held him now, as it had done twenty times before. He stood with his fingers on the latchet and watched. What had that rogue been doing out so early in the twilight? That it was nothing good might well be guessed. Oswald wondered and looked, and saw him steal along the sinuous face of the keep, appearing and disappearing with the bend of the walls, till at last he was within a hundred paces; and there he halted, and, opening a little hatchway door used by the soldiers to keep their halberds and lanterns in, took from beneath his ample merchant cloak a palm-leaf basket, such as sawyers carry to their work, and, very silently placing it within, closed the hatch again. Oswald noticed the grey dawn shine for a moment on adze and hatchet, auger and saw, and when they had gone, Saluzzio, not knowing he was seen, like one who rests after hard toil, stretched his lean arms aloft, and lifting his cap let the cool morning wind play for a time with his damp grey elf locks, as he laughed long and silently that joyless chuckle of his.

In a minute he began to return, and the Hospitaller knew he was coming to the narrow flight of steps which would bring him unto the upper level, and so to the door by which the Count stood; and,

possessed by an indefinite fear, he waited not to meet him, but hurried through the portal, and, closing it behind, took his way across the ante-room, as still as death in the twilight, and so down the winding stone staircase, and out into the town in the direction of the beleaguered English walls.

He had not been wrong in his calculations. The Greek arrived at the postern door, little guessing who had just used it, a moment or two after it had been closed by the Hospitaller, and, entering himself, he also went down, a slinking figure that seemed to have an unholy affinity with all the shadows in its path, and, like the knight before him, paused in the ante-room, and, making sure no one watched, presently lifted a corner of the tapestry above Margaret's door, and listened keenly a space at the key-hole with malice and suppressed excitement strongly marking his eager, excited face. Not a sound broke the stillness, not the lightest sleeping sigh of the English heiress, whom he too thought within, came to his ears; and with a shrug of the shoulders Saluzzio let the curtain drop, and turning stood, chin in hand, reflecting a moment.

It was daybreak by this time, and he knew the women would soon be stirring. Perhaps some light sound had already warned the Rhodian that if he would not be found there he must be prompt. He moved on his heels back to the curtained doorway, and, listening for another minute, presently thrust

a hand into his doublet, and pulled out from thence a clean, undelivered note—a cruel, wicked bit of cunning treachery it was—tied up with a strand of silk such as a soldier might pull in haste from the frayed end of a pennonette, and, holding that deadly missive daintily 'tween two fingers as a page might, laughing and pulling off his russet cap the while, Saluzzio bowed low in mockery at the English maiden's doorway; then, chuckling to himself and glancing gleefully first at the letter then at the archway, presently capered a step or two in the exuberant pleasure of his villainy, and deposited the paper on a tressel so near the doorway that the first person coming out must surely see it.

Then he backed off a pace, and looked at it as though loth to leave that masterpiece of treachery. And first a shade of doubt crossed his countenance, and then a smile came in place of it. "No, no!" he muttered to himself; "'tis best like that,—most like a love missive dropt by a friendly messenger. She cannot miss it; and the hook will go all the deeper and strike the truer home because the bait is laid so innocently. Were I to hand it in myself, or get another to, she would yearn and question him like a shy hawk who smells the trapper's blood-red hand behind the dainty lure. No; 'tis best so. Farewell then, lady; I will not shorten your beauty-sleep by one sweet sigh, for some of those who doze and dream this morn in Rhodes will doze and dream,

I greatly hope, to-night in Paradise!" And chuckling to himself, Saluzzio shuffled away across the rush-strewn floor, down the steps, and so out into the grey and red flush of the morning.

Then happened the next step in that tragic comedy of errors which fate was weaving. That note which the Greek had left was meant for Margaret Walsingham; but she, of course, was gone, unknown to any one, some hours since. And now Samana, having risen, had taken her bath, combed out her sleek Hellenic hair, and slowly put on her Eastern robes, and so at last had passed, with a mind full of sad wonder at Oswald's roughness of the night before, and a jealous aching heart ready to take fire at the least spark, into the greater chamber, where she marvelled much to find no English lady, until presently the letter was espied which bid Samana not to be alarmed at this unexpected absence, but to remain quiet in the turret until Margaret came or wrote again. It was strange, no doubt, but the Greek girl could do nothing but obey; and having set the room in order and busied about, as a woman will, amongst overnight disorder, she went out into the corridor beyond the curtained archway, and there the first thing that her eyes lit on was another letter, this time that which Saluzzio himself had left.

She picked the missive up, turning it here and there, then read the superscription. It was addressed

to Lady Walsingham, and the writing, rough soldier hieroglyphics, was Hepburn's, or so like it that Hepburn himself would scarcely have dared to disown what was in fact a cruel forgery. But nothing Samana knew of the nice differences between one Christian scrawl and another. She saw instinctively those rough great soldier letters were fashioned by a hand more used to sword hilt than grey goose-quill. It was to Margaret; and so, in the quick sequence of her fatal mistake, who could it be from, she thought all on a sudden, but from faithless Oswald, that dear renegade, whom she had noticed, with many a pang, had strangely haunted the English lady's presence these last few weeks, and whose last night's disdain of herself was not yet twelve hours old. She stood there twisting that fateful missive in her fingers, and piecing all kinds of fancies together in her jealous heart, until the desire to know what Oswald—'twas he for certain, the Greek thought—was writing in secret to her rival grew overwhelming.

Another time she might have conquered the inclination, but last night's affront and bitterness was hot upon her; the letter, unsealed and loosely tied by the artistic villain who had done it, was lying invitingly in her hand, and Margaret away! She could not resist the temptation, and soon, with a heart that fluttered and many a pause to listen to the distant tramp of feet, she had unwound the

thread, and, unfolding that treacherous sheet of paper, was poring over it with eager inexperienced eyes.

It was brief and to the point, as became a soldier scrawl; and thus she spelled it out:—

"July 27, 1480.

"SWEET LADY,

"He who sets your love above everything on earth craves a boon of you,—and it is to meet him at sundown to-morrow night at the foot of the ruined tower beyond St. Nicholas. The fight is all but done—a day or two may set us free to fill our sails and, in happy places, put this long Rhodian captivity behind us,—there is much to talk of regarding our wedding which cannot be said to listening walls, therefore, sweet lady, the boon,—and the tryst at sundown! whereof in happy expectation,

"Yours dutiful and always . . ."

And then there followed a rough sketch of Hepburn's cognizance, a boar with a broken chain and collar, and, underneath it, his motto.

But gentle Samana knew nothing of heraldry or the nice differencing of one knightly blazon from another. She leant pale and dazed for a time against the archway, conning that letter over with eyes so full of hot tears they scarcely saw it. Oh! it was Oswald's, she gasped, for certain. Oh, horrible and treacherous! oh luckless, luckless she!

She crumpled the parchment fiercely in her hands, and, throwing it on the ground, stamped furiously on it; running, meanwhile, her fingers through her hair in an abandonment of picturesque Eastern grief; she cried, and cursed herself and all men; then, picking the paper up, went back into the inner room, and there smoothed it tenderly out again, read it over and over in a storm of passionate love and fear and jealousy, and read and cried until her eyes were sore and her heart was sick.

All day, while great things were happening outside, she brooded over that letter, carrying it about in her bosom, and torturing herself with visions of her faithless lover flying with this new and splendid love of his to lands where she could never hope to follow them; and, then when the time of the tryst drew near—her trysting-place, she remembered, with a new pang of agony, where false Oswald had first whispered love into her maiden ear—and no Margaret returned, she resolved to go to that sweet place of golden bygone moments, to throw herself upon her knees before the man who held her life in his hand, and, upbraiding and imploring, move him to pity and compunction, if so be he might still be moved; and if not—— She wrung her hands, and skeined out her long black hair, and beat her white bosom for the thousandth time, but durst not answer that last thought.

CHAPTER X.

THE grey light of dawn was just giving place to the lighter colours of the morning as the Hospitaller, drawn by the increasing activity of the Turkish gunners, threaded his way through the narrow streets of Rhodes. The soldier instinct which moved him towards the southern ramparts did not seem to be shared by such of the garrison as he passed. Two months of incessant cannonading had dulled the ears of the weary citizens, and numbed for the moment the perceptions of those gallant mercenaries of St. John, who, if the bare truth were told, for the most part knew more of tilt-yards and the nice etiquette of heraldry, or mock battles holden under ladies' eyes, than of the stern game itself. It was a misty, quiet morning; the shadows still deep in the bazaars, the shot-torn leaves of the date palms and the pennons before each smouldering camp fire hanging down dew damp and heavy. Overhead the cupolas of the town were gleaming pearl white and salmon-colour as they brightened in the eye of the sun; and down below, De Montaigne's scabbard, touching now and

then upon the cobbles, was the only sound that scared the prowling Rhodian dogs from their uncleanly meals amongst the refuse heaps. The townsmen were all abed behind their cracked and crumbling walls; the last drops of oil were sputtering and smoking out in the little horn lanterns that hung from the gable points overhead; here and there Oswald passed a muffled watchman fumbling down the street—more sleepy than the sleepers to whom he called the time in listless monotone; and here and there in the open places groups of tired swordsmen lay about, russet and yellow and scarlet as their liveries varied, sleeping round the grey ashes of their dying camp fires, or at the feet of those nodding sentinels who stood asag, leaning motionless upon their staves and drowsily hoping for *réveillé*.

Oswald, too ill at ease to rest himself, sauntered on, muttering as he did so, "Pray heaven the pagan be as sleepy this morning as these lazy rogues." He passed the lower town and that portion of the walls where the langue of Aragon had its posts. Nothing moved there. From port to port and bastion to bastion Oswald went along the western face, passing the tall gate of St. John with the deserted roads trending into it from the open country beyond, and the broad flag of the brotherhood hanging listless by the highest tower. On the left, as he sauntered southward down the city walls, was a steep drop of twenty feet into the town, and a zone of disorder

stretching inwards thence, of reed shanties for the soldiers, of broken carts and gun carriages, of litter and confusion, such as must be where an army has lodged a month or two,—while beyond that no man's land again came the city proper, all its roofs and squares and porticoes shining in whites and reds, line beyond line, and tier beyond tier, right back in a gentle slope to where the great sea lay—a sea that, beginning azure under the city walls, melted away in turquoise and opal hues into the most distant morning shine.

On the other hand, looking towards the foe, the walls which Fulk de Villaret had built, and a dozen later masters strengthened, dropped down sheer full forty feet to the rock and sand below. From their very feet on this Arcadian morning, with the air soft as silk and peace again resting on the world, the millet and barley fields only half harvested when the Saracen came, the olive gardens tier above tier, and long trellised vine slopes were all hidden in a mist which lay about that sunrise hour, and twined amongst the ruined shrines and the pleasant garden plots behind the myrtle hedges, filling the valleys and the woods with its soft folds right up all but to the topmost hills themselves. Here, in one place, the mist was no thicker than gossamer, and you could catch the sparkle of running water through it half a mile back, or see the orange trees in shadowy knots like a spectral army, rank behind rank, trending

away into the vague distance; in another bend of the ramparts that veil was so thick that, as Oswald stopped upon the walls to frown and peer uneasily into that fair but treacherous screen, his dark shadow shone in a golden nimbus on the white mirror over against him like the shadow of a giant leaning over some gigantic bulwark.

Nothing seemed to move behind, however, and presently De Montaigne came by many a yawning crack in the battered ramparts, many a mighty heap of rubble fallen on either hand, and many a sleeping group of soldiers snoring amongst their weapons, to where Provence held the bastions a little to the southward of the great gate of St. John, and just outside the Jewish quarter of the town.

Here the Turkish guns had made wild work indeed of it. Many times within the last week their batteries had opened a breach right through the walls, and every time the glacis was ready for assault the knights and townsmen had torn down houses and shrines and built on the ruins a new retrenchment. But it was not within human power to keep up that heroic game for ever, and as Oswald stood a space alone on that lonely rampart (for the defenders were so weary they slept just as they sat or leant about amongst their weapons) all round him was chaos and desolation. The great walls were cracked and starred and crumbling everywhere, and in one place a clear way, wide enough for an oil-cart to pass, had

been hammered through them from top to bottom. It was a horrible cleft to a soldier's eye. And outside, a great rubble shoot, spreading fanlike towards the misty meadows, seemed to invite the stormers up; and inside, another steeper shoot ran downwards a ragged path of rock and sand and coping stone littered with yesterday's dead bodies still asprawl in all their ugliness, with spent shot, riven tent-cloths, dead steeds, tumbled war-gear, and piled confusion. On either hand of that narrow cleft the ramparts rose, jagged and scarred, into the air; and the passage itself had been hastily barricaded, Oswald saw, with beam and plank, and spars from the harbour; yet, for all that, it was a very ugly gap, and De Montaigne scowled as he looked down into it. In an hour or two, no doubt, should the Turk not come before, brave indomitable hands would begin again the daily task of building anew for the Turkish gunners to unbuild; and meanwhile the flag of Provence fluttered over the ruins, and away in their huts the gallant brothers of that langue lay sleeping and dreaming of their fair manor lands in distant France. It was not Oswald's charge—he was but a stranger there, of no authority,—so, shrugging his shoulder and vowing under his breath a silver candlestick to the high altar of Our Lady of Tours if she laid a happy ignorance of the gap upon the Turkish captains that morning, he tightened his cloak about him, and, picking a way down the ragged stony steps,

and then winding between the tents and the desert strip beyond, paced moodily across the bare land, and entered one of those ancient and picturesque streets abutting on it.

Between the black and the white, the shadow and the sunshine, he came suddenly face to face with Andrew Hepburn and half a dozen English knights hurrying down to view the breach, a rumour of which had passed last evening all along the walls. It was not a meeting Oswald would have courted, but he could not do less than stand a minute and speak with them. And while they stood there, leaning on their swords and chatting soldier-talk with peace all about them, one sudden shrill scream of a dying man —it might have been the last yell of a surprised sentinel—went up into the morning, and, turning quickly on their heels, to the incredible wonder and consternation of Oswald and those with him, they saw swords flashing in the sunlight, and the handful of Hospitallers on the walls by the gap mixed in a wild medley with three times their number of those who, even at that distance, he could recognize as white-robed Turkish soldiery.

The Rhodian dogs sat up and stared; the sleepy hucksters, yawning by their booths, shaded their eyes, and stared open-mouthed at that spreading scrimmage; the early housewives, cleaning their brass kettles at the green street fountain looked, and looked again, then fled, like startled rabbits, to lock

themselves within their doors, as though bolt or bar would serve against the ruin that was coming quicker and quicker over the crumbling English rampart!

De Montaigne saw and knew, and smote his hand upon his bosom, and, crying to Hepburn, "Come on, Huffcap;* I have a fancy to-day will settle more than one thing that stands between us!" went racing back across the open ground; and as he ran the picture of that cunningly planned surprise unfolded bit by bit before him. He had not gone a hundred yards, though as quick of foot as any man within the town, when he saw the shouting Moslems overpower the English guard, and, dreadful sight! hurl them headlong over the walls, crashing unto the ground below, where their mangled bodies struck with horrible thuds. Before he had gone another fifty paces the Turks were running wildly up and down the ridge of the undefended rampart, their figures showing clear and hard upon the sky beyond; another pace or two, and Moslem helms and spears were rising in clumps and patches, like corn out of the ground in April, all along the outer edge of the walls. It was ruin and torture and shame for every man and woman in Rhodes. The town was lost, he did not doubt it though there was little time to think. As he ran through the tents, shouting at the top of his voice, the sleepy soldiers were just turning out,

* "Huffcap;" *i.e.* the commonest and cheapest kind of Saxon ale; a word associated only with the lowest class of yeomanry.

and over him in another minute the white ramparts were gleaming, and right ahead the blue sky was showing through the great cleft in them, clear and cloudless, almost down to the ground.

Description stands beggared before the scene that followed. Under the shelter of the morning mists Paleologus had gathered his troops for one final effort. The whole weight of his army had been concentrated during the night opposite to the breach made by the cannons of his gunners and the glacis of ten times demolished walls, which sloped outwards from it. With savage desperation he had laid a scheme which, if successful, must swamp Rhodes under the mere weight of the numbers hurled against her; and if unsuccessful, must mean horrible ruin, no less certainly, to the enemy, who was thus spending all his effort on one tremendous blow. And now, as Oswald and Hepburn, with a handful of knights and yeomen, rushed frantically to the breach, the game seemed already played and lost. Out of the green olive woods beyond, and the last strands of the lifting mists, the Moslem army was flowing in towards that gap in undulating converging rivers of steel and gold. On it came in hurrying ranks of grey and green, until that, now racing, torrent reached the open space before the walls; and there the swelling ranks came altogether, and horse and footmen, all those glittering pagan waves of colour, swept, yelling and struggling, after their successful escaladers for the

same narrow gateway, their shrill *atabels* screaming the charge, their green flags fluttering above, as all those ordered bands were choked up into a wild confusion, and heaved and then broke like a strong ebb tide struggling to sea through a cleft in the hills. Horse and man began to go down unstricken by any enemy, and the remorseless tide of men behind trampled them underfoot as the great army swept on, and, just when Oswald reached the barricaded gap, whither he had rushed as the place of greatest danger, hurled itself into that breach, and smote in human waves against the Christian walls a hundred yards on either side, treading its own front ranks down by scores and hundreds, and clambering over their bodies and lapping up against the ramparts like a living sea under a perfect tempest of pagan clamour.

In the breach itself, scarcely two sword-swings across, the pressure at first was horrible. For the first few moments of the impact a solid mass of Moslems was forced into that mouth of hell so tightly wedged no man amongst them could lift his hand; and as that seething mass still swelled and heaved at the front of the barricade of masonry and beams, the Hospitaller came up, and, fiery sword in hand, slew them like unresisting sheep, while Hepburn hurled his huge strength upon their flank, destroying like the avenging angel. Shoulder to shoulder those two champions for a few minutes held the place

alone, killing till the red blood was ankle-deep between the rocks, and the mangled bodies on the outer side of the beams paved the way for the stormers to victory.

Up those bloody stepping-stones they came, and lopped over, and by sheer weight drove the struggling Christians through the passage. There, once inside the walls and more in the open, others could join in that wild sword play, and with a rush a new-come knot of Hospitallers burst on the Turks, and fighting every man with the strength of ten, drove them back, and penned them up again in the bloody gap. And there, as Turks came quickly from the out and Christians from the in, the fight grew fiercer and fiercer every moment and now one side gave, and then another. Down in the cleft it was all dust and blood and mire and broken weapons; and, up above, the Moslems on the ramparts were tearing the walls to pieces, and hurling the fragments on those who fought below. Now, with a splendid rush, Oswald and Hepburn, again together, swept all before them, and well-nigh cleared the passage; then back would come the howling Turk, and back the struggling Christians went—for it was but a handful to a thousand! And Oum el Dabadah, the "Favourite of the Sultan," cut down the tall Count of Grossendor; and Bonneville of Savoy laid El Dabadah, in turn, a corpse right across his victim. The Spanish lord of Amposta stabbed the black-bearded Pasha of Behneseh a hand

deep in the breast, and that jewelled pagan's son, yelling with rage to see it, cut the proud Spaniard down from cheek to bosom before he could wrench out his steel. And fierce Andrew Magnavacca, the fighting prior of Ferrarese, all in his white canonicals —for he had been singing matins when the storm began,—killed Yason of Trebizon, and was himself laid dead in a bloody heap a moment after; and Olli, the light-skinned Caucasian master of the Turkish horse, next lay dead across John of Revelsby, that gallant Lincoln squire! And so they were piled one across another, while the fight swung to and fro, and backwards down the bloody path the Christians slowly went inch by inch and foot by foot; Oswald de Montaigne, silent and white, knightly at every point, all nerve and strength and keen eye and faultless courage, fighting to the death with matchless obstinacy; and Andrew Hepburn, twice wounded, bellowing with rage and pain, making fierce rushes on the foe, and paving his retreat with bodies! Never had the town been more nearly lost. In another five minutes the breach was completely won, and the Christians were shredded out into scattered knots, still fighting desperately against the foremost of that Moslem flood that came ever surging up the outer slope, and struggled in mad confusion to pass the narrow entrance.

It was just at that fatal moment when all seemed over that a band of knights came racing

down from the palace, and, almost quicker than it takes to write, had gained the slopes; and as they rushed into the fight with one tremendous cheer, the scattered defenders recognized the Master himself in the grim grey man who led them. All the disjointed groups dying singly about the field came at the magic of his presence together like quicksilver in the alchemist's palm, and, shouting "St. John and D'Aubusson!" with one headlong effort hurled themselves upon the head of the advancing column.

And after the Master, through the tangles of the furious fight that followed, the splendid prowess of De Montaigne toiled in vain; and by the side of that wonderful man, Hepburn's bull strength availed him nothing. Right into the seething heart of that deadly alley D'Aubusson cut his way; five times he went down into the red mire and chaos of littered arms and armour below, and five times he rose again untamed and indomitable! Three times his friends lost him to sight, and three times by furious onsets they regained him. And so fiercely was the fight maintained, and so matchless the courage of those gallant few who stood the brunt with D'Aubusson, that presently all the Turkish columns halted, and from front and rear rose fierce wild yells of wonder and fear and disappointment; and those in front cried, "Back! back! the devil himself fights for this Christian town!" and those behind cried, "Forward, Paradise and Allah! Think of the women and the

plunder!" and to and fro the Moslems surged and heaved under the walls, the green flags tossing and the white plumes waving, the coats of mail and the gay harness flashing and glancing in acres of brightness, as that great host halted, uncertain and dubious.

Then the Master, having rewon the breach, set to work to clear the captured ramparts. Ladders were brought and placed against the masonry, and up the first one leapt D'Aubusson, closely followed by Hepburn and a score of others. 'Twas a new sight to see those gallant soldier-monks storming their own bulwarks; but at it they went right gallantly. On top the Turks were crowded so thickly they could not swing their weapons; and every time their jostling masses moved, a dozen or two shrieking wretches fell headlong into the town beneath, where they were instantly butchered by the Rhodians. Twenty ladders were against those walls in a trice, but the Master was the first atop, and, mad as a wild cat robbed of its young, got himself a footing, and laid about him so furiously with his sword that no man dare face him. Others followed him quickly. Here one party got amongst the pagans, driving them like sheep back over the outer scarp; there a ladder was overturned, and all the knights upon it crushed; but nothing could resist D'Aubusson, and gradually the day began to wear a better face.

For by this time succour was at hand. The

long-legged Italian levies came racing up along the southern ramparts in a tawny cheering crowd; northward the walls were soon black with the hurrying brotherhoods of Provence and Aragon; backwards towards the town a hundred rivulets of foot and horse were streaming towards the place with a grey horde of townsmen following close behind. And presently those forces joined; and then, for three long hours of that summer day, on either side the curling dust went smoking in huge columns up to the blue Ægean sky, and Christian and pagan stormed the great rampart in turn; and now the Western pennons danced and won and fluttered on the breach, and then the Moslem flags. Men hung from those bloody walls in black festoons like swarming bees, and were hurled over on to the rocks below; while away across the plains the ownerless horses and mules went pounding, and the wild yell of battle swelled ever louder and louder as the sun went higher and higher.

A hundred pens could not tell all the incidents of that crowded, glorious fight, but presently it was won. Sick at heart and weary, though a new glacis was made of the bodies of their best and bravest all but up to top of these indomitable ramparts, the Moslems quailed at last and wavered. It was the moment D'Aubusson had waited for, and, sweeping all his knights together once more and for the last time, he fell on the tired masses of the enemy. Nothing could

stand against that avalanche of Christian valour led by that man. For one moment the Moslem ranks reeled and staggered under the onset, and the next broke and fled in wild panic as the Hospitallers came headlong behind them down the slope. Then it was battle no longer, but slaughter; and through the green orange groves rolled back the carnage, wave on wave, son treading down father, and brother brother, while behind the flying infidel the Nazarene blades played incessantly like a white wall of summer lightning. Back through the groves and gardens, back by the desecrated shrines and ruined fountains, back up the green slopes of Elia, and through the long streets of their own tented town, back in one remorseless rush of rout and ruin the besieged drove the besiegers.

A bowshot from the breach D'Aubusson had halted, and was standing with a few knights about him on a green knoll by a stream, watching the battle cloud go roaring up the hill. As he looked and saw the enemy's camp burst into flame in twenty places, a fair-haired page came running back through the orange groves, dragging behind him through the mire —for it was too heavy for that gleeful lad to carry— something round, in a great green cloth. Up the mound the boy lugged that blood-stained trophy, and, dropping on one knee for a minute before the knights, the next minute jumped up, and laughingly rolling the bundle to the Master's feet, untied its four corners,

and turned out before him from the folds of the royal Turkish standard the bloody head of Mustapha Ben Shammer, the captain of the Turkish forces.

"Now praise to God for this!" said D'Aubusson, "praise to the great God who has to-day through our poor arms saved Rhodes and Christendom. Here, on this very spot, build we a chapel to our Lady of Victory; thus, thus, shall it stand, oriented by this the sword that has led you on." And as he drove the point of his cross-hilted weapon upright into the ground, and set the future aisles by its shadow on the turf, all those stood that about him uncapped, and cried with one voice, "St. John! St. John! and Our Lady of Victory!" *

But in that splendid rush of the Christians, which had swept the Moslem hordes before it, and at the joyful knot of bronzed veterans who clustered round D'Aubusson on the green knoll amongst the orange gardens, and wrung each others' hands and waved their victorious swords overhead as they shouted "For St. John and his servant Peter D'Aubusson!" Oswald de Montaigne had not been. Mangled and bloody and white, between two crags of masonry, he was lying senseless, just as he had fallen in the front of the last rush upon the gap, overwhelmed by wounds and exertion. There he was found by a couple of English squires, who lifted him from the rubble, and, propping

* The ruins of this chapel still stand outside the old walls of Rhodes.

up his head, unlaced his gorget, until, in a minute or so, as the fresh air revived him, he opened his eyes, and, staring wildly round, gasped—

"How goes it? who wins? Set me on my feet again and give me a sword!"

But the squires held him gently back; and one answered, "Nay, sir, lie still; your wounds gape as you move. It is not necessary; the breach is cleared, the walls rewon."

"Yet surely they fight and shout," persisted Oswald, as the cries of the knights came confusedly to his ears, "or is my head but full of strange noises?"

"Ay, sir! they shout, but 'tis for victory; the siege is done and the day is ours!"

And as the cheering of the soldiers came louder and louder to him, and the answering cries ran here and there along the walls, and were taken up in every street and alley of the rescued city that was now pouring its noisy contingents to the bastions whence the flying columns and the burning camp of the besiegers could be seen, Oswald, too, sprang to his feet, and, shaking his fist aloft, cried, "Victory! victory!" with any of them, and then fainted again.

The squires carried him gently out of the breach and down into the open, where, every more worthy place being full, they laid him on a common soldier's pallet in a tent; and, a little later on, a surgeon, hurrying round amongst the numberless wounded of that fierce but glorious morning, found him so, and, hastily

binding his wounds, gave him that to drink which lulled their pain, and for many hours held him in a dull emotion trance. When this painless episode was was over, De Montaigne woke anew to find the day was nearly over, and the low, afternoon sun was throwing long shadows from the open tent-flap across the floor. Then, presently, as he lay there in the strange faintness of his wounds, with his mind and heart the clearer somehow for the weakness of his body, he began to think of all which had happened since the siege began, of every incident in the heroic resistance,—of how five thousand knights of many rival lands and breeding, knit by one common bond, had proved five thousand brother heroes. His feverish blood ran quicker still and quicker with pride to think he had been one of that band; and as the pulse of pride and weakness quickened in him, little things became less and great things greater. He thought of Samana and then of Margaret and all she had done and suffered, of her matchless courage and high worth. "A noble wench indeed!" he muttered to himself in the old chivalrous fashion, "well worthy to be loved and reverenced, a sweet friend to inspire gentleness and worship." And so he rambled on until a shadow crossed his face as, not very clearly at first, yet clear enough to mar the picture, he remembered the plot against the pale English lady to which he was a confederate. And as he dwelt on it, clearer and clearer in detail and blacker and blacker

in fashion came back to him yesterday and the evil knowledge of how, only an hour or two before, he had surrendered the helpless girl, cooped friendless in his lonely tower, into the hands of as base a scoundrel as any in those seas. It made him blanch a shade paler still under his bloodless skin, to think of the stake there was on that girl's life, and the quality of the villain who now schemed against it. He leant upon his elbow on the hard, blood-stained mattress, and outside the tent-flap he could see the soldiers trooping to and fro, the white shine on armour as bands of his gallant companions in arms pricked here and there, and everywhere the joyful Rhodian crowd restlessly wandering to and fro in many coloured stream in the first delight of its freedom.

A little stronger in body, and perhaps those great unredeemed needs of his would have made their voice heard above all the better promptings of that moment; but Oswald was so weak, his mind so dead to fear, the free old spirit and the gentle training would not be gainsaid. He looked back on the schemes of yesterday with the impulsive hatred and scorn of his changeful nature. Was he to lie here bedridden whom Konisberg had taught in chivalry, on whose shoulders the stainless blade of the gallant Hermanstadt had laid the accolade of knighthood, while perchance a base ruffian, a hired cut-throat, worked some vile purpose on the girl whom fate had trusted to him? He would go to her and tell her the truth,

weak as he was. It was purgatory to lie here under that shadow, and her forgiveness would cool his blood more than all the leechcraft in Rhodes.

The Hospitaller reeled to his feet, and, in his haste, stopping not to note how the exertion rimmed with a new red those great black stains above his wounds, threw on a white-cross cloak that chanced to hang upon a peg, and, pale and eager, but transformed by a high resolve, his face lit up with a wonderfully fine light as he felt, over all the turmoil and confusion of his emotions, that Oswald at last was worthy of himself, he staggered forth upon the errand.

The red and white of physical pain shone upon his handsome face; he laughed a little at it all as he plunged through the familiar alleys unnoticed by the happy noisy crowds. Oswald was himself again: a horrible black cloud seemed to have lifted from him as the shadow of the storm lifts from the meadows; he felt buoyant and lightfooted, though the blood welled anew in the great wound in his side at every step; he was young again—he knew it, he felt it, though he had to pause, gasping and giddy, oftener and oftener as he neared the battered ruins of his stronghold, rising, untamed and crowned with victory, from the blue harbour waters in the last glow of the sunset. His heart was beating wildly, his courage invincible, as presently he stood a spell and stared up at those great towers. Fool that he had been! Coward, with the meanest sort of cowardice! What!

Oswald de Montaigne, who had laughed in the face of kings and princes, brow-beaten and driven near to hell by a false, black-hearted usurer! He had been a fool, and worse, he cried, beating his hand upon his breast. He would go straight to his cousin—he knew nothing of her flight from the tower—and, holding both her hands like this, and face to face, would tell her the honest truth, reading as recompense, in those dear forgiving eyes of hers, her great womanly forgiveness. Then—he hardly knew what would happen else or next. Gads! he laughed, the sense and reason seemed pumping together out of those great red wounds of his, and leaving him all hazy, golden-souled,—all Oswald—the old Oswald, bright, happy again, redeemed and worthy of himself,—but afterwards, and somehow, he would shake the usurer's shackles from him, laughing at his scowls and puny threats of vengeance, and, with Samana and a new love, seek a new fortune.

The very roar of the people behind, cheering their hearts out on the victorious walls, fired his blood like wine. How could he doubt or hesitate when all Rhodes, to his feverish ears, seemed thundering approval behind him, when to-day one great joy in every man's heart had swallowed all smaller perplexities? He laughed as the excitement and new resolve spurred his fainting strength; and now, passing through the unguarded doorway of his keep, mounted the familiar stairs.

Never had they been so steep before, the Hospitaller thought—never so numerous,—the walls seemed converging to his hazy eyes, the mighty flags of Seljuk granite seemed rising to his feet. He stopped a minute presently, leaning heavily upon the rail, while he gasped for breath, and noticed, with dull surprise, that even as he stood his blood was falling with quick drops upon the stones. Then a dreadful fancy seized him that something might come between him and his restitution: Margaret might not be found, or—worse, and not to be thought of—Saluzzio, perhaps, had already done some hateful deed by her. De Montaigne started up the few remaining stairs at that fancy, and, staggering through the ante-room, listened with beating heart for a second upon the threshold of the great chamber. All was still. Perhaps she prayed or read? Nay, there came the rustle of a woman's gown upon the rushes. He lifted the curtain and looked in. The pale light of the evening only dimly showed each shadow and outline of the empty place; the tapers were unlit, the room disordered, sad, and empty. Had he been deceived by that light rustle? No; for as he lifted the tapestry yet a little wider, a white something like the hem of a light Greek skirt—a wreath of mist, a white moonbeam, it might have been—had shone for a minute upon the battlement outside, and then was gone away towards the outer western turrets.

And thereon a wild fantastic terror seized him; he

staggered into the dark room, and, stretching his hand, cried in a husky whisper, "Margaret! Margaret! it is I. I am come!" and listened to his voice echo round the lonely walls. "Fool!" he cried again, "ever one minute too late. Margaret! Margaret!" and, so crying, plunged out upon the turret and groped his way forward. Lord! how weak he was growing! Another ten paces and the dying soldier just caught sight again of that white hem once more, fading away behind a buttress thirty yards ahead.

No road lay there, he knew, but the jagged and littered steps leading down to the ruined bridge spanning the ugly gulf between the main tower and the outer one. Often and often Samana had crossed it to him and their love-trysts amongst the rocks below; but since then shot and battle had hacked the timbers of that crazy path, until it hung by a breath over the rocks, and no man ventured on it, no one had errand there. It had been to him a heavenly path, leading to a place of golden moments, but to-day!—suddenly its frailness flashed upon him as she in front went thither. Oh, shame and terror!—supposing *this* were the Greek's treachery;—supposing Margaret, tempted thither by some black device—so true Oswald's instincts were—was even now going to her death;—supposing Saluzzio had tampered with that which even unloosened a man's weight would ruin! He strove to cry out, and not a sound came from between his hot lips, his strong knees trembled beneath him, his

feet for a moment seemed rooted to the hard stones under; and then he was plunging recklessly forward down the littered way, forgetting wounds and weakness, forgetting everything for the moment in the desperate desire to save and warn, stumbling and staggering while the life welled from his side, and so he came in a moment to the bridge head.

He was too late! The white figure had gone swiftly down, and, not once looking back, essayed the dreadful path; she was five yards out upon the riddled planks before he saw her, and ten before he came into the clear above. With eyes wide staring, and heart that scarcely beat, he saw the great picture of the bay set out before him,—the noble white harbour town his courage had redeemed glimmering fair and stately under the purple glow of the evening,—the battered turret in front with its socketless windows and crumbling walls,—the ugly rocks far below with the fingers of the sulky tide winding black and snake-like amongst them,—the bridge, full in the eye of the still yellow west, brighter than all the rest—and her upon it. Gods! she was so near he could see the white fingers stealing along the riven balustrade; he could hear the cool sea breeze rustling her silver skirt against her ankles. What lover could look upon her he loved, in such circumstances, without instant recognition? It was not Margaret before him, it was poor faithful Samana going for the last time to the old tryst with a heart

burning with love and rueful tenderness,—Samana, with but one thought, stealing away in the twilight to knit her white fingers once again round the truant's neck, to show him the cruel deadly invitation to her rival that lay heavy as lead in her bosom, and to see answered, for good or ill, in his eyes, the pleading question she scarce dare fashion even to herself.

Oswald knew her on the minute, and all his love and fear found vent in one strong cry. "Samana! Samana!" he cried; and she heard him, and not only heard him, but recognized the love in that one passionate exclamation, — the endless unswerving affection of it. What more could she have asked for? The old confidence and joy leapt up in her heart, and, before the echoes had done with the name, she had turned, and was standing midway in the bridge, her arms out to the coming lover, the flush of the water on her cheeks, and a sweeter smile than any she had smiled of late brightening on her face. Oh, luckless chance! Had Oswald but kept silent, those light feet and steady hands that were moving with the swift confidence of one who knows no danger might, by some happy miracle, have crossed the crazy structure in safety, and so won out by very trustfulness from a scoundrel snare. But when Oswald called, Samana turned and stood waiting for him irresolute; and so fate came upon her.

It was but a second, a breathing space, she stood there,—just enough for the Hospitaller to see the love,

and the pride, and the recognition flush into her fair young face,—and then a gust of evening wind out of the darkening Ægean, a tremulous murmur running along the timbers of the bridge, a sound of rending wood, a white rift that ran swift and horrible all down and across the gaping planks; and Oswald, in one swift moment of comprehension, saw Saluzzio's treachery, and how 'twas going—saw that that base villain had himself destroyed the last cohesion of the fatal bridge, across which he had then hoped to tempt Margaret Walsingham,—and the next minute, with foot of wind and heart of fire, the soldier was racing down the slope,—had set foot upon the opening timbers that trembled as he touched them, and, gallant to the last, knowing nothing now of pain or fear, nothing but his great love, had swept across the intervening space quicker than he had ever rushed to a dangerous breach before, and had swept Samana up—up as a kestrel sweeps a mottled, nestling quail from last year's stubbles—up until they were face to face and heart to heart once more. Jove! he might win her yet it seemed, so strong he was, and resolute. Three swift strides he made—the far landing-place was but two more; one look he gave to those ragged grey walls, and one into the soft Greek face that nestled on his shoulder, and the next minute he had made his spring, and his foot had caught in a jutting beam,—and, before he could realize how the matter went, loosened nail and rivet started from their

places, mortise joint and crossbars parted, and, with a roar that made the chargers prick their ears as they stood to their evening corn in the Master's stables over the water, and a grey cloud of dust,—timber, and joist, and beam, and plank, and coping, and all upon them, went thundering down upon the rocks below.

* * * * *

A minute or two after the bridge had fallen, Saluzzio, who had been prowling near, came swiftly from a by-door in the lower rounds, and, running excitedly to the nearest place whence he could view the ruins, peered over. The Greek was tremulous with excitement, and as he looked down upon the scene a man rose feebly from the wreckage by a rock.

"What! you there already, brother Oswald?" laughed Saluzzio as he recognized him, with a glee that in the stillness that had succeeded on the sound of the falling ruins seemed elfin and hideous. "You there already, comrade? By sweet St. John, friend, your nose must be better for carrion than a Rhodian kite's! Is she dead?"

"Dead, you hell-hound!" cried Oswald de Montaigne, reeling like a drunken man—"dead? Ay, dead,—dead 'tween too much love and villainy;—dead, you black spawn, by the hand of him who sawed yonder timbers through last night;—'dead'—ay, dead indeed! There look, you devil!—look till eyes start from sockets and black terror withers

the black heart that planned it! Look! look!" he yelled, wavering and mad,—"look!—and win hell for ever by the sight!" And De Montaigne, bending down, raised the girl for a minute, and turned her black hair off her face so that her father could see her; kissed her three or four times, and fell dead himself across her!

With glazed eyes that stared stupidly upon the havoc below, and white senseless fingers that tightened slowly on the ragged battlements till the blood ran from their nails, and mouth agape, and hair that bristled under his greasy merchant cap, the unhappy father looked down upon the tragedy his own hands had made. For minute after minute he stared at that white face, awash with the black tide, the only face in all the world he loved, the face for which he had toiled and schemed and plotted for years; and then, as the gloom darkened and the silent stars came out one by one, the darkness grew over him, until he was lost, and nothing broke the stillness but the lap of the black tide below that crept up the gullies between the rocks and first played with the long strands of Samana's jet-black hair, and then, growing bolder, unbound her from her lover's arms, and so presently bore her silently and gently away to her sleep out in the great dusky sea.

CHAPTER XI.

When the next morning dawned Rhodes lay resting like a tired victress in a grey and golden peace. Not a step sounded on her unguarded ramparts where the red stains of yesterday were scarcely dry, not a foot-fall in her sleepy streets; a dead deep silence hung about the smoke-stained mouths of those cannons and culverins that for two months had bellowed defiance into the answering echoes of the mountains opposite. The green hills were locked in silence as deep as the silence of the First Morning; the white-tented city on their slopes had evaporated with the night mists; the circlet of smoke which had fringed the low ground day after day was drifted out into the Ægean, and the lazy winds were slowly unskeining it there into nothingness. The sea was deserted, there was not a sail or speck upon its great blue fields where the morning sun played softly: it, too, was free for all to come or go.

Rhodes had fought and won. Vardar and Struma and Maritza had shrunk away in the night from those walls against which the red waves of Moslem

invasion had thundered in vain; the stately city was free, and rested voiceless and spent and weary with the long effort of that splendid struggle.

Down in the chancel of the great chapel of the Order an hour after sunrise the morning light was falling through the painted windows in many coloured hues and staining the floor with gay mosaics; the sweet ancient legends with which pious soldiers of the cross had emblazoned the casements were tinting the still air with strands of lavender and yellow, and tracing slowly moving frescoes of saint and martyred virgins on the white walls and pillars of the silent aisle; the yellow sunshine of that peaceful Eastern summer morning was filtering through each crack and casement, and lying amid the dim black shadows in amber pools; the morning breeze came whispering along the cloisters, and, stealing through the porch, went softly down the nave and round the fluted pillars as though the hem of unseen ghostly garments swayed altar fringe and war-worn banners on the cornice; the fine thin air still smelt of myrrh and frankincense from Vesper censers, and a deep untroubled silence, through which the pulse of the distant sea came like the measured breath of a tired sleeper, hung over everything.

Presently into that stillness moved an acolyte in hood and cassock, who knelt and marked his forehead with water from the basin; then, with scarcely more noise than the dry leaves of the last feast-day

flowers had been making as they rustled before the sea wind in the aisle, he stole up to the altar, and, performing his genuflection, began with quick fingers to light one by one the great wax tapers in their golden candlesticks, till the parti-coloured twilight of the shrine shone with yellow constellations. Next, from the palm-leaf basket, set ready by the lectern, he took orange-blossom and lilies, white magnolia buds and jasmine, which early adventurers had that morning brought in from the far green tangles of Astyra; ivory roses, come by fast felucca with the light from Thermydron and still heavy with the sunrise dew upon them; and soft sulphur-coloured buds of cactus and starlike things from the recovered glades of Achæa, and set them here and there, until the altar and the steps blossomed in the taper light, and the strong breath of those virgin flowers filled the great nave with delightfulness.

It was a pleasant task, such as might herald a bridal, and when the priest had done he knelt and prayed; and before he had finished the hush of the chapel was again broken by the sound of a footfall that came on hastily a pace or two, then paused, and came on again, diffident and hesitating like one who seeks fearfully and in haste for something that he fears to find. The acolyte lifted his eyes, and there was the man Morrogh, whom he knew, pale and faint, holding his black servitor gown close about him, and glancing anxiously into each

arch and shadow, as he faltered up the aisle with hesitating feet, and hands that in his nervousness were constantly outstretched to clutch the gilded rails and carved heads of the pews that twice a day for long years had seated the ranks of soldier-monks, but now stood tenantless and empty. The calm-faced friar, himself but a darker shadow in the shadow of the rood, rose, but remained still until Morrogh, unknowing any one was near, with those fearful searching eyes and pale lips had approached close to the altar steps, and then the monk said gently, "Morrogh!" And at the sound of the voice, so strange and clear in the stillness, the servitor started back a pace, and cried out, as though he thought it were not a voice of the real world, then looked and saw the man, and, after hesitating a moment, leapt forward.

"Oh, Edmund!" he cried, using in his fear and haste the old temporal name by which mild-eyed "Brother Anselm" had been lad and lad with him years ago in pleasant English fields,—"oh, Edmund, where is he? They told me he was here, —and dead. Oh, I must see him once—once before they come and take him!" And Anselm felt the poor servant's hand trembling on his russet sleeve like aspen leaves in October.

He looked at him a space and marked the pale cheeks, the trembling lips, the sorrow written so eloquently in every working feature, and then asked,

"Is it your master that you seek?" And when Morrogh assented with an eager nod, Anselm turned away a moment to cross himself, and sigh, "God grant me such true faithfulness to mine."

The monk could not refuse the boon so humbly asked, and, signing to the other to follow, he led the way across the mid aisle and down the further wall until they came to where a heavy curtain hung across a deep recess. There he stayed, looking dubiously at his companion as he asked, "Is it still your wish to see that which no one but the prior and myself have seen?"

Morrogh's chin was on his chest, his eyes upon the pavement; he durst not lift them for a minute, but he bent his head. The curtain was drawn aside, and with a gasp and a cry Morrogh clutched upon the sleeve of the priest, and stood, with white face and dilated eyes and trembling lips, gazing through the portal.

That archway opened on a side chapel in the thickness of the walls; and down from above, through the twisting strands of the scented smoke of the tapers burning before an altar, the sunshine was filtering into the narrow cell from a single lancet window and dimly showing its vaulted roof, its rough-hewn walls, the little star-set shrine away at the back, the hanging lamp, the bare flagged floor, and in the middle—the centre of that strange dim picture—two rough trestle benches, and on them, side by

side,—though Morrogh saw but one, and, wildly holding out his arms, cried, "Master! master!"—were lying the two conspirators in this drama we have traced—Oswald de Montaigne, his dark face set cold and stately in the white mould of death; and on his left Saluzzio the Greek, brought hither in the hurry of yesterday, was lying also dead—dead by his own act, his eyes wide open, his bloodless lips fixed in a never-finished cry of shame and fear, one lean white hand clutching about him the folds of a great cloak only half hiding another hand frozen hard upon the hilt of the knife, whereof the blade was deep within his bosom.

The yellow tapers flickered, the sunshine filtered down, a bird sang in a bush without; it was so still for a minute that you could hear the Greek's blood, black as ink, still dropping slowly into the black pool on that Christian pavement, and the pigeon cooing to his mate on her eggs in the gable. And then, with a bitter cry, poor Morrogh broke the silence, and, leaping forward, threw himself upon his knees by Oswald, kissing again and again in his long-pent, patient, never-suspected love the white nerveless hand he held so humbly and tenderly between his own; and as the irresistible grief welled up within, he cast his arms about the dead man's neck filling the little chapel with lamentations until voice and expression both gave out, and, dropping

his head upon his master's body, the man wept bitterly and long.

The bird still sang, the sunshine came climbing brighter and brighter down through the blue veil ladder of the incense smoke; Edmund the monk had stood for many minutes with bent head silently telling his beads in the shadow of the archway curtain, when a distant noise of trumpets sounded through the empty church. He started and listened, anxiously looking from the dead man on the bier to the faithful servitor who still wept bitterly over him. Again came the music of the trumpets amid a confused sound of cheering people, and Edmund, having hastily lifted a corner of the drapery and looked out, hurried over to Morrogh and touched him on the shoulder.

"Brother!" he said, "rise, quick! they come whom you would not wish to see, and who must not find you here. There, let me help you to your feet. Lean upon me so—indeed, indeed, you must. He whom you love would be the first to bid you hence;" and with gentle force the monk got poor Morrogh up and led him halfway to the door. There the servitor stood again, now crying unabashed like a girl, with the great tears streaming down his face, and turned, for he could not go, stretching his trembling hands towards the knightly bier, and sobbing till the whole chapel was full of his plaintive grief. "Master! master!" he cried, and struggled to throw himself

again upon his knees. But closer and louder and braver came the sound of the trumpets and the cheering, and he who held his sleeve durst wait no longer. "Brother," he said, "you undo me if you stay. For my sake cease weeping and go; another time, perhaps—to-night maybe—you shall come again and share our last offices to the Count Oswald, but not now. Quick, Morrogh, quick!" And pulling him by the coat with strong yet gentle compulsion, the priest got the poor weeping servitor to a side wicket, and, opening and helping him through into the outer world again, closed it hurriedly, and came back into the church just in time to bear a share in another and fairer sight.

This was the dual one of, firstly, a public thanksgiving for the victory which had crowned the defence of the town by the Hospitallers; and secondly, linked with that for many reasons of convenience and policy, the marriage of Margaret Walsingham to Andrew Hepburn. The first ceremonial needs no explanation; it was the earliest thought of every one in an age when all things began and ended in the shadow of the Church. As for the second, it was the result in part of chance and part of policy.

Margaret, in throwing herself upon the protection of D'Aubusson, had of course told him everything, and trusted to his fatherly counsel to guide her in regard to the two men who both claimed her hand. He had at once foreseen that the trust was one of

many difficulties, and, should the siege end suddenly, this sweet heiress of great wealth would be no mean responsibility to him. Then came the fight, and that very evening, as thoughts of Lady Walsingham mixed in his mind with the thousand things that throng the head of a victorious prince, word was brought privately that Oswald de Montaigne had died of his wounds, that his body had been found under the ramparts of his keep and conveyed to the chapel of the Order to await the master's wishes.

Two things were then open to D'Aubusson. He might either tell Margaret this grievous news, and thus oblige her both in decency and real sorrow to put off for many weeks her wedding; for the whole of which time he would be responsible for the safety of one whose youth and beauty made their possessor in that citadel of dissolute and headstrong young nobles a firebrand amongst straw. Or, on the other hand, he might, by keeping Oswald's fate to himself for the moment, and urging those many points of policy upon Lady Walsingham which she would quickly understand, persuade her to a prompt marriage that would put the heiress under the best of tutelage, and at a stroke free himself from an onerous guardianship and give some sort of public recognition to one who had benefited the Order as much already by her high courage as later on it was like she would do by her liberality.

D'Aubusson had chosen the second alternative.

Margaret, knowing only that Oswald was wounded and might not be seen, and still fearing him greatly, had yielded to the Grand Master's persuasion; Hepburn had been sent for, and six hours given that blushing couple to make their preparations.

And now, as Edmund looked out, the knights were coming to their prayers, the wide folding-doors of the church had been set far open, the benches where the burghers sat on feast days put back; outside, framed in the dark round of the porch, the southern sun was shining hot and yellow on the broad piazza, and the white streets of Rhodes the victorious, with the bright blue sea beyond. And down through the sunshine, as Edmund hastened to the entry, came in a minute from the direction of the Grand Master's palace, the great procession—a long twining line of bright steel and gay coats, with pennons dancing above and burnished bits and scabbards ringing below, a stream of colour flowing 'tween banks of laughing Rhodians in their brightest gear. First came trumpeters and heralds wearing the tabards of twenty Western princedoms, then censors and acolytes and friars on foot; and after them, two and two, the chaplains of the Order, bronzed soldier-priests, riding their strong Flemish steeds under the shadow of their white-cross flags as though the saddle were their true and native seats. Close on their heels, with bugles and clarions sounding, spears' points twinkling above, and bright trappings

glittering below, rode the *langue* of England, put there first to honour the fair bride they guarded, a strong troop of weather-beaten veterans still, though gallant Adam Tedbond had fallen, and stout Henry Haler's saddle was empty, and Adam Ploniton slept hand in hand in the foss with brave Thomas Bem!

It would have done you good to hear the Rhodian cheer as Docray the prior led down that band, and bronzed John Kendall, the Turcopolier, was recognized by the shouting crowds that swung and swayed, and laughed and cheered, as he and Lumley and Batasbi, D'Avalos and Viselberg, Boswell and Ruck, came pacing stately by. And if they cheered and laughed and surged to see those heroes pass, think how the clamour swelled, how the many-coloured kerchiefs waved, how shout on shout echoed through the air, how gleefully the smiling sleek Levantian tailor-merchants uncapped them, how maid and matron tried and struggled for a place when the broad banner of St. John itself came flaunting and snapping down the street, as though that noble rag felt the strong breath of victory in every silken fold; and under it, pale and grave, not moved one hair's-breadth by the clamour, with keen grey eyes of sleeping fire that noted all things great and little, sitting his fretful charger like a sovereign prince, D'Aubusson the Master himself came riding slowly by!

On his right, in an open litter, was Margaret Walsingham, as pale as the soft white sarcenet of

the borrowed wedding-gown she wore, though bravely smiling and happy-looking, with the old colour and courage dawning again under the pallor of her face, and a gentle word for every one. On the other hand of D'Aubusson rode honest Andrew Hepburn, blushing for both of them between pride and soldier shyness, wearing his wounds like new honours, as indeed they were, and thinking in his rough but gallant heart, as he bent and smiled on every side in recognition of the noisy sea of friendly faces that encircled him about, that this were surely ordeal worse than any assault or *mêlée* he had ever shared in.

Behind those three, stretching back down the long street in a sparkling band of colour, came trooping all the *langues* of the brotherhood, Castile and Arragon, Provence and Italy, Brabant and Luxemburg, side by side with Thionville and Troyes, their flags flying up above, and the stalwart Christian conscripts of twenty states riding below. Faith! it was a fine show turned out to give thanks for a great victory and honour Margaret's wedding, and Rhodes was in a mood to make a worse one gay. It would take ten pages to note even the colour of the motley liveries of the troopers, and another ten at least for their captain's names and armorial quarterings; but what does either matter? All the gay suitings of Badajoz and Limoges, of Naumburg and Trieste, of Velletri and Viterbo are dust; the gold-scaled lizards climb about the many quartered escutcheons which those

princely mercenaries carved, in their leisure, upon auberge wall and dormitory, and another age uses to fence its millet fields and dam its runnels. The very names of the soldiers have been merged by history in the splendour of their deeds, so perforce they pass unnoticed here, riding out into famous oblivion like many another in the glad confusion of that day when Rhodes was saved and Christendom redeemed by their valour from untold terrors.

Down through the echoing streets came that gallant show, with the bright sun above them and every window crammed with smiling faces. They left behind them the long street of the knights, where a thousand pennons were dancing in the cool sea breezes, and passed the great piazza, whence they saw far below the parti-coloured sails of a hundred imprisoned ships being shaken out for the first time in many weeks, and heard the sailors cheering as the long line of steel and colour twining across the openings between the booths caught their eyes, and so at last to the church porch—a noisy, jolly, jostling crowd, with but light discipline for the once amongst them, comrade shaking hand with comrade now met for the first time since the siege began, and laughing heroes knee to knee with other heroes that they thought never to see again alive; and outside of them the merry crowd that cheered out of mere light-heartedness, and bandied from mouth to mouth strange stories of those soldiers' prowess in the

bygone fight, as each well-known champion came pacing down: and no one's praises were louder on their lips than stalwart Andrew Hepburn's—no one's, save Oswald's.

Now they came to the church porch, and D'Aubusson, throwing the reins to an esquire, sprang lightly down. Down jumped Docray and Kendall, and Lumley and Viselberg, and Boswell and Batesbi,—the Latin knights and the Spanish, the French and the German, the tall counts from Western Europe, and the Christian peers of every province from the Pruth to the Elbe, were all on foot in a minute; and then, at a sign from the Master, Hepburn took Margaret's hand, and, following close behind D'Aubusson, the tall flag of St. John stooped to the porch and went sailing up the aisle with all those gallant soldiers two and two behind it, until they filled the holy place that had but just been dim and solitary with a brave show of bright armour and knightly vestments. At the great altar the priests had been early ready, and now, with censer and crosier, came forward and, as D'Aubusson, kneeling down, put his steel cap on the step beside him, all that martial throng too knelt like one man with a clank of steel and a rustle of velvet and chain-mail, the mass was sung, the Host was lifted in benediction, and in Latin the hymn of victory and thanksgiving was chanted by the monks.

With downcast eyes and heart full of many con-

flicting emotions, Margaret listened to that stirring soldier mass, and, almost before she knew it, the singing and the responses were over, there had been a duteous pause, and then somehow she felt instinctively in the hush that the soldier congregation had taken a lighter mood upon itself. She looked up wonderingly, and every eye in the church was upon her; the priest was standing expectant at the altar; and D'Aubusson himself, gentle and strong, had come across the aisle and was holding out his hand.

Poor Margaret knew what it meant in a sudden rush of recollection, and rose up slowly, took one fearful, fleeting look round that sea of bronzed handsome faces, still pale with long night watches and the smart of new wounds, and, reading admiration of herself and envy of Hepburn in five hundred eyes, all at once began to blush until the very paving stones seemed hot beneath her,—and, blushing splendidly, put her white hand in the strong, outheld hand of the Master, all ridged and hard with sword-hilt blisters, and was led up to the altar.

She scarcely saw Hepburn. The Master might have married her, had he listed, to that great German boar, John Lubeckstein, who stood gnawing his yellow moustache with envy close at hand, or to hunchbacked Halsey of Egersund, or to any one, and she mayhap had been none the wiser; but she stood there like a brave soldier's daughter taking a

soldier's wedding, tall and fair in her white Eastern stuff,—a single white rose, brought last night from a rescued garden on the hill, all the jewelry on the heiress bosom,—and on her head, making the brown-red hair like a corona of finest gold, the broad hand of the sun, that, coming down through the foliate windows above where the nesting swallows were twittering to each other, limning that lady, clear to all who watched behind, like a dazzling white column against the shadows beyond where, unknown to any, Oswald lay silent and indifferent on his bier.

Margaret heard the priest ask who it was gave this woman to be married to this man, and the veteran upon her right say, in clear tones gently imperious—

"I, Peter D'Aubusson, the servant of St. John and Grand Master of his Knights, freely and willingly bestow her in the name of her father."

She felt her hand in Hepburn's presently, and heard him name and claim her; she murmured her own assent, and it was over. The procession formed again, and, as it had come, down the aisle, out into the sunshine through a sea of happy faces and bright colours and a noisier crowd than ever, wound its way back to the palace.

In the great courtyard there a hundred tables were set for the burghers; and in the hall itself a thousand knights presently sat down round D'Aubusson and Margaret Walsingham to a sumptuous feast in which, to tell the truth, the pillage of the Turkish camp bore

a larger part than the last meagre stores of their own long-beleaguered citadel.

There can be no need to dwell on that noisy, jolly feast, or to tell how those sunburnt heroes, out of steel harness for the first time in two months, ate and drank and laughed, and sent the golden Cyprus wine and the purple Rhenish and the pale strong Sicilian drink flowing down throats dusty with siege and shouting, while their flags, all in ribbons, flapped overhead, and the joyous babble of the rescued town came in at the open windows in one ceaseless murmur, like the hum of a bee-hive in the spring-time.

The Master, who was sagacious enough to know that as much wisdom sometimes lies in leniency as in rigour, rose from his dais early, and left those knights to their revels. But before he went he drew Andrew Hepburn aside; and then Hepburn in turn spoke to Margaret, telling her D'Aubusson had said the first ship to carry news of victory would leave the harbour for Italy that evening, and D'Aubusson had offered him and her a place within it. It was a great chance, he said, the best ship and the swiftest in the fleet, going, moreover, to the very port they would have wished,—the galleys that followed would be crowded with the returning soldiery, and, if the lady could pardon such haste, Hepburn said, it would be very well if she could sail with him that night. Margaret blushed and laughed, and thinking of no other excuse for delay, said that Oswald was

somewhere wounded, and "it would not be kinsman-like to leave him till his hurts were healed." And at that the Grand Master took her hand, and in his grave fatherly way told her the truth—that Oswald was dead, and even now the monks made ready for the burial,—that the deceit had been practised unwillingly, but for her advantage,—and she must not cry.

But of course she did, a fierce storm of tears, shed in her own royal fashion, that was followed for many a day afterwards by new outbursts of grief that overwhelmed her whenever she thought of gallant, but wayward and unhappy, Oswald.

Later on in the day she sent by a messenger, since she might not go herself, the white rose she had worn, the bridal flower out of her bosom-knot to De Montaigne; and the monks put it next his sword hilt, under his crossed hands upon his breast. And the last thing in Rhodes to her was still Oswald, brave and handsome, and unhappy: for that night in the twilight, as the ship which bore Margaret and her husband away to fair and peaceful England stood northward a few minutes from the harbour mouth to catch the slow Eastern breeze coming round the point, they passed close under the northern walls of the town, so close they might have thrown a stone upon them; and there, on the cliff path, as they looked up, winding amongst the aloes was another procession taking its way towards the cemetery with

a dozen barefooted singing monks in front, and twenty silent and sorrowful knights behind.

Margaret knew it, though brave Andrew Hepburn tried to spare her that knowledge, and, breaking from him, flew to the vessel's edge, where, with tearful eyes and outstretched hands, she cried—her heart wrung with pity and affection—"Oswald! dear, dear Oswald! Oh, I am sorry; and forgive—indeed, indeed I do!" and could say no more, but broke down and was dissolved again into one of those strong outbursts of tears, sobbing and crying so for many minutes with Hepburn, cap in hand, standing grave and gentle by her, until presently they turned a corner in the hills, and the town was lost to view.

An hour afterwards they were slipping westward through the dark, over a starlit summer sea, with the tepid Ægean waters prattling by the vessel's sides in long ribbons of purple shadow and golden phosphorescence; the warm Marmarice wind, heavy with the scent of olive and myrtle, whispering in the swelling canvas overhead; Orion, great and yellow, low down on the night in the southward; and eastward, behind them, Rhodes, a dark, indefinite shadow on the long, smooth heave of the sea.

THE END.

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